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*University of Montana, Missoula*

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EXPLOITATION OR EMPOWERMENT?  
WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN THE CAM MODELING INDUSTRY

By  
EKATERINA VICTOROVNA BAYS

Bachelor of Sociology, Ivanovo Power Engineering University, Ivanovo, Russia, 2007

Thesis

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Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School  
Graduate School

Teresa Sobieszczyk, Chair  
Sociology

Jackson Bunch  
Sociology

Katharina Werner  
School of Social Work

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## Exploitation of Empowerment? Women's Experiences in the Cam Modeling Industry

Chairperson: Teresa Sobieszczyk

Sex work and the experiences of women within it have been studied in-depth over the past four decades. However, the majority of studies on sex work focus on women who work in prostitution, overlooking rapidly growing cam modeling industry and its female workers. Over the past ten years cam modeling has become an increasingly popular adult entertainment industry, gradually displacing traditional pornography from the online sex market (Senft 2008). In this study, I used theoretical frameworks of radical and liberal feminists as well as polymorphous paradigm to investigate if the cam modeling industry is either an empowering or an exploitative form of women's labor or rather if it combines elements from both perspectives. To answer this research question, I conducted ethnographic observations of cam models' open video sessions on the website LiveJasmin.com and eight in-depth interviews with cam models. In their interviews, cam models described that working in the industry ensures their financial independence and offers a flexible work schedule while providing an opportunity to explore their own sexuality and creativity. My interviewees also revealed that building romantic relationships or lasting friendship within a camming community was an essential factor of working in the industry. On the other hand, all cam models discussed how challenges of dealing with stalkers and customers' degrading requests, negotiations with "freeloaders," and body shaming from customers, as well as negative stigma, affected their emotional and psychological well-being. My findings demonstrated that cam models encounter a full spectrum of experiences while working in the industry, ranging from rewarding and liberating to extremely traumatic and life-threatening. I concluded that a cam modeling is neither empowering nor exploitative form of women's labor; instead, it is marked by uneven levels of agency, subordination, and job satisfaction that can best be understood from the polymorphous perspective. The experiences of cam models are shaped by complex structural conditions and vary across time and place. This study fills the gap in research on sex work by investigating understudied phenomenon of cam modeling and various experiences of its female workers.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The woman is wearing black lace lingerie and a tiny, silky looking red robe. She has bright make-up: long eyelash extensions and burgundy lipstick that accentuates her natural beauty. She moves her curvy body, erotically dancing to the slow music playing in the background. The interior of the room looks like a luxury hotel room with Asian decor: the furniture, the walls, even the bedding are laced in gold. According to her profile, the name of this woman is Ann Hill. Ann is a 22-year old cam model who performs adult shows on the website LiveJasmin.com, as do thousands of other women, men, and transgender individuals from all over the world.

Over the past ten years cam modeling has become an increasingly popular adult entertainment industry, gradually displacing traditional pornography from the online sex market (Senft 2008). With the widespread use of the internet and the improvement of technologies, live webcam performances have created opportunities for people around the world to make money from the comfort of their own homes. Nowadays a lot of women consider cam modeling a professional occupation and a steady source of income (Senft 2008). They advertise their webcam accounts in social media, create personal websites, and invest significant amounts of time to make themselves a name in the industry. For some, camming has become a road to female empowerment, which provides cam models with a unique opportunity to fulfill their sexual desires while earning a substantial income.

On the other hand, there are reasons to be skeptical about the empowering potential that cam modeling has for its workers. There are likely thousands of women who choose to participate in live webcam performances because they don't have a

better choice (Harris 2008). Lack of employment opportunities or insufficient income, inability to work full time jobs, and/or lack of education help force these performers to enter the online sex industry (Matthews 2017). Cam modeling is a means of moving out of financial instability rather than exciting opportunity to satisfy their sexual desires. Online performances might be uncomfortable and morally unacceptable for some cam models (Jones 2018). Customers with financial power can take advantage of cam models' subordinate position by "pushing" their personal boundaries to fulfill their sexual, sometimes humiliating fantasies. Moreover, cam models have to accept the fact that they work in a stigmatized industry. Camming may lead to web models' social oppression: their occupation could become known to families and friends at any time (Bleakley 2008).

Web models' success stories received a great deal of media coverage, but little research has been done on what goes on "behind the screens" of the cam modeling industry and how it impacts its workers. While men, women, and transgender models are involved in the online sex industry, I will focus on the experiences of female workers due to the time and funding constraints of this research project. I will examine the phenomenon from two opposing perspectives. On one hand, cam modeling can be understood from the liberal feminist perspective, which focuses on women's self-determination, their sexual liberation and empowerment. On the other hand, the "camming" industry can be examined from the radical feminist perspective, which focuses on women workers' exploitation and oppression.

To investigate this phenomenon, I posed the following research questions:

(1) *What is the camgirl industry?*

(2) *What aspects of the camgirl industry make it empowering for female cam models?*

(3) *What aspects of the camgirl industry make it exploitative for female cam models?*

To answer these research questions, I conducted ethnographic observations of interactions between camgirls and their customers in open video sessions on the camming website LiveJasmin.com. Through eight in-depth interviews with cam models, I investigated their perceptions and experiences of working in this online sex industry.

## CHAPTER 2. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews relevant literature on the background of the camgirl industry, its emergence and development from a personal page broadcasting one's daily activities to a multi-million-dollar online entertainment industry. This chapter also discusses feminist perspectives on sex work and experiences of women within it. Particularly, it focuses on two opposing approaches: radical feminists, who seek to abolish the sex industry as harmful for all women, and liberal feminists, who approach sex work from the position of women's empowerment and liberation.

### *Background on the Webcam Modeling Industry*

Webcam modeling is an understudied phenomenon; only a few researchers have previously investigated this complex and dynamic industry (see, for instance, Carvalheira and Gomes 2003; Senft 2008; Mathews 2017). In their research, Carvalheira and Gomes (2003) focused on Portuguese chatrooms, visited particularly by Portuguese people. According to Carvalheira and Gomes (2003:347), an adult webcam performance or cybersex can be defined as "a relationship with someone in order to perform sexual activities with one or more partners through real-time written communication of erotic-sexual content." The authors conducted their research in 2003 when interactions between models and users were primarily text-based communications. Nowadays, models more commonly provide audiovisual performances to customers over the Internet through web cameras that allow access to a real-time "show." Cam models perform erotic acts online, such as stripping, displaying nudity and sexually provocative behavior. However, some camgirls choose to remain mostly clothed and merely talk about various topics while still soliciting payment from their



customers. Generally, cam models are free to choose the amount of sexual content for their broadcasts.

One of the main contributions to the field of camgirls' study is Theresa Senft's (2008) *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*, which reveals the undiscovered world of webcam modeling. In the book, the author shares her experiences performing as a camgirl while conducting an ethnographic study of camgirls at the University of East London, U.K. from 2002 to 2004. Based on existing knowledge of the online camming business, she discusses the origins and development of the webcam industry. As Senft (2008) reveals, in 1996, Jennifer Ringley, a Dickinson College student (in the United States), broadcasted live footage of herself having sexual intercourse with her boyfriend from the university's dorm room. A few months after the first live video, which was a success, Ringley started to charge viewers for full entry to her website. When she was not transmitting live videos, her customers could access a photo gallery with her photos. JenniCam became extremely popular and attracted over 100 million visitors on a weekly basis (Senft 2008:24). Jennifer Ringley shut down her enterprise after seven years and eight months of successfully broadcasting her personal life to the rest of the world. JenniCam heralded the advent of the webcam models and the era of a new online adult entertainment.

The "camming" industry has gotten bigger and more prominent over the past ten years. Nowadays webcam modeling is a fast-growing industry, displacing traditional online pornography and reshaping the market of online adult entertainment (Senft 2008). The *New York Times* reporter Matt Richtel, in his article "Intimacy on the Web, with a Crowd," calls adult webcam modeling a "digital era peep show" (Richtel 2013).

Paul Matthews (2017) conducted a recent study with camgirls who were broadcasting online performances from studios located in the Philippines. The study challenged common perceptions about sex work and agency, revealing a range of possible self-identities associated with such work. Angela Jones' (2018) article "I Get Paid to Have Orgasms," perhaps one of the best-known examinations of the subject, claimed that the new online sex market has flourished precisely in the absence of the ability to physically touch and the absence of the many risks associated with physical encounters. In her book *Next Wave Cultures*, Anitta Harris (2008) explained that the phenomenon of live web cam performances could not have happened before this moment in history due to several factors. It is the result of a combination of inexpensive and easily accessible internet, the "popular culture of teen celebrities who flaunt their bodies on the covers of national magazines and the timeless rite of passage that is a teenage girl's search for identity and blossoming awareness of her own sexual power" (Harris 2008:6). Paul Bleakley (2014:895) argues that it is the interactive nature of camgirl websites that explains the widespread popularity of this industry and provides "a unique selling point, missing from traditional pay-for-use pornography."

Not surprisingly, there is no scholarly documentation of the current size or profitability of webcam modeling due to its hidden nature. The only data currently available are provided by mainstream media accounts about the industry (Jones 2015). In 2009 online adult entertainment exceeded spending at adult clubs (Edelman 2009). In 2013, the online webcam industry created an estimated revenue of \$1 billion, and the business is constantly growing (Song 2016). Alec Helmy, the publisher of *Xbiz*, stresses that in a short period of time the streaming of live adult performances became "the

engine of the porn industry.” According to Bleakley (2014:894), throughout the late 1990s and 2000s, pornography was the largest adult online entertainment industry, with global revenues estimated at around \$20 billion annually. Between 2007 and 2011 the revenues of the traditional porn industry had dropped by an estimated 50 percent, mainly due to an increase in free broadcasting of websites which reduced the need for viewers to pay for access to online sex (Bleakley 2014:894).

As of March 2019, a Google search for “list of webcam modeling websites” yielded 1,700,000 results. These searches also include advertisements from agencies offering their services to place and promote camgirls on the “best” websites. These data demonstrate that the “customized” sexual experience available on webcam modelling sites and the interactive nature of this industry attracts visitors to video sessions with camgirls from all over the world. Despite its relative newness, webcam modeling is a rapidly growing business that has begun to transform the industry of online adult entertainment, resulting in the decline of traditional online pornography.

### *Feminist Perspectives on Sex Work*

Sex work and the experiences of women within it have been the epicenters of debates, known as “sex wars,” among feminist scholars over the past four decades. Feminists found themselves on opposite sides, with the radical camp seeing the sex industry as gender oppression and the consequence of patriarchy, and the liberal camp viewing it as an opportunity for sexual fulfillment and women’s empowerment (Snyder-Hall 2010). This section will cover contrasting perspectives of radical and liberal feminists on the sex industry.

*Radical feminism: the sex industry is exploitation of women.*

Radical feminism is rooted in its understanding of the social system as inherently patriarchal, which manifests male privilege, oppression and exploitation of women (Gerassi 2016). The term “patriarchy” was originally used to describe a specific type of “male-dominated family” where the large household of women, junior men, and children were under the rule of the “patriarch” - a dominant male. Recently it has been used in reference to male domination, “to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways” (Abeda 2010:1). In highly patriarchal societies the authority over women belongs to men in both public and private spheres, which causes women’s exclusion from social institutions.

Radical feminist scholars such as Dworkin (1985, 1993), MacKinnon (1988), Farley (2006), and Jeffreys (2008) adopted a radical, oppression-based framework to understand the commercial sex industry. Radical feminists argue that by purchasing commercial sex, men take advantage of the subordinate status of women, which include stereotypes of women as sexual objects, property, and servants of men (Kingshott and Jones 2016). According to this approach, patriarchy is solely responsible for the existence of the sex industry, where women’s bodies serve the interests and sexual desires of men. Prostitution comes not from the female nature, but male dominance over female sexuality (KrüGer 2004).

In her work, *Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography, and Equality*, Andrea Dworkin (1985) vividly expresses her perception of the porn industry and women’s place in it: “It is women turned into subhumans, beaver, pussy, body parts, genitals exposed, buttocks, breasts, mouths opened, and throats penetrated, covered in

semen, pissed on, shitted on, hung from light fixtures, tortured, maimed, bleeding, disemboweled, killed.” According to Dworkin (1985:11), men believe that all women are whores by nature and that it’s their inner desire to be raped and to be hurt. Catherine MacKinnon (1989:327) supports this assertion, adding that from a male perspective, all women are supposedly full of sexual desire, wanting to be taken and used, “with perhaps just a little light bondage.” Gender inequality is institutionalized: if those acts were to be done to a man, they would be considered to be crimes. When the acts of violence are performed on a woman, they are perceived as entertainment for males (Dworkin 1985). According to MacKinnon (1989:322), “male force is romanticized, even sacralized, potentiated, and naturalized, by being submerged into sex itself.” If a woman does not resist having sexual intercourse with a man, she must have wanted him too, so there is no rape.

Consequently, radical feminists have adopted a victim-oriented approach in regard to sex workers, emphasizing its degrading, exploitative and harmful nature (Snyder 2008). Prostitution per se is viewed as an “invasion” and abuse of a woman's body. According to radical feminism, no woman would choose to work as a prostitute if she had a better option; prostitution “is a story of lack of choice, abuse and suffering” (Hamilton 2009:89). According to the radical feminist approach, pimps or traffickers force the majority of women to enter the sex industry. Others end up working on the streets as the result of difficult life circumstances such as drug addiction, poverty, and emotional trauma from childhood sexual abuse: “Incest is a boot camp for prostitution. [...] you send the girl to learn how to do it: to have any real boundaries to her own body; to know that she’s valued only for sex” (Dworkin 1993:4).

According to this approach, prostitutes are passive sexual slaves, and men—Johns, pimps and traffickers—oppress women through sexual subordination. One of the key concepts promoted by the radical feminist camp emphasizes women's lack of agency; accordingly, they cannot refuse having sex with men, who have power over them.

Radical feminists advocate for banning all forms of sex work and seek to address the negative experiences that women face in the oppressive sex industry (Gerassi 2016). Furthermore, they stress that sexual exploitation and ongoing sexual abuse are “bad for the body, bad for the heart,” harming women's physical and mental health (Beran 2012:4). According to radical feminist scholars, the only solution that will solve these issues is to eliminate the sex industry as a whole.

*Liberal feminism: the sex industry empowers sex workers.*

Liberal feminism or the pro-sex worker perspective is the opposite approach to radical feminism regarding prostitution. Liberal feminists emphasize the economic empowerment of sex workers, their autonomy of choice and expression of their sexuality (Rubin 1984; Wills 1981; Califia 1980). Liberal feminists argue that sex workers' choice to engage in prostitution is like any other employment decision. Those who choose the sex industry as their professional occupation deserve the same rights as workers in any other occupation (Beran 2012). In sex industry sex workers do not sell their bodies but rather a service, similar to other types of work such as a food service workers or office administrators “who sell their labor power for some fraction of its value in order to obtain the means of subsistence for themselves” (Overall 1992:709). Liberal feminists argue that there are some professions such as masseuses

or psychotherapists who offer very personal, intimate services, and such work is not typically viewed as degrading. Moreover, similar to sex work, these occupations are not of reciprocal nature: the provider is not expected to receive the same service in return. According to Debra Satz (1995:73), who focuses her research on feminist philosophy and issues of international justice, many forms of labor imply giving some control of an individual's body to others. "Such control can range from requirements to be in a certain place at a certain time (e.g., reporting to the office), to requirements that a person (e.g., a professional athlete) eat certain foods and get certain amounts of sleep, or maintain good humor in the face of the offensive behavior of others (e.g., flight attendants)." The author notes that some control of our capacities by others does not mean to be "ipso facto destructive of our dignity" Satz (1995:73). According to the pro-sex work approach, prostitution should be treated just like any other business transaction where a particular service is being sold (Sloan and Wahab 2000). Liberal feminists often employ the term "sex worker" instead of "prostitute" to highlight that it is a form of occupation with typical labor issues such as wages and working conditions (Kesler 2002).

Liberal feminists counter claims from radical feminists about the danger and high rates of injuries in sex work by explaining that these reflect the most exploited examples of prostitution, which are not representative of the whole industry (Rubin 1984). The liberal, sex-positive approach also highlights that these issues are not unique to the sex industry since there are other fields of work such as factory work or even performing housework for a "battering" spouse where women can be exposed to disease, injury and psychological abuse (Overall 1992:722). Sex-positive feminists believe that most workers in the sex industry have made a conscious decision to enter the industry after

considering a number of work alternatives (Sloan and Wahab 2000). For some, sex work can be an alternative to a minimum wage job and can help them achieve financial independency and self-sufficiency. For others, it can be seen as sexual liberation and an avenue of expressing their own sexuality. As one sex worker revealed: "The difference between being a prostitute and being a wife is the security the wife's got. But it's also the difference in having a lot of men versus having just one. They can always be replaced" (Kesler 2002:233).

In their book, *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, Pricilla Alexander and Frederique Delacoste (1987) generate a discussion about having "sex for money," based on a collection of writings by street prostitutes, exotic dancers, escorts, porn stars, and massage parlor workers. The authors argue that our society views sex as a moral issue, especially for women. Sex became a political tool to maintain the social order: anything that goes beyond the notion that a woman desires sex to please a man automatically becomes immoral. Gayle Rubin (1984), who is a pioneering activist in feminism and sexuality studies, argues that stigma which is associated with some sexual behaviors is rooted in Western religious traditions. According to this system, sexuality that is "good," "normal," and "natural" should be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. Any sexual behavior that violates these rules is "bad", "abnormal", or "unnatural" (Rubin 1984:9). Modern Western societies classify sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual values. Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are at the top of the erotic pyramid. Sex workers, such as prostitutes and porn models, are at the bottom of the hierarchy because their "eroticism transgresses generational boundaries" (Rubin 1984:9).



Individuals, whose sexual behavior has a highest position in this hierarchy are rewarded by society through systems of certified mental health, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits. Individuals whose sexual behaviors have the bottom ranking are assumed to be mentally ill, criminal and restricted from social mobility and institutional support. Rubin claims that “this kind of sexual morality has more in common with ideologies of racism than with true ethics. It grants virtue to the dominant groups and relegates vice to the underprivileged” (Rubin 1984:9). The author concludes that this type of regulation of sex and sexuality is simply “sexual apartheid.”

Liberal feminists reject the victim-oriented approach adopted by the radical camp, denying the notion of sex workers as “victims in need of rescue,” emphasizing instead the free choice of women (Lux 2009:3). Liberal feminists often critique radical feminists for their stance against prostitution, which tends to stigmatize prostitutes, rather than understanding their choices or the realities they experience in this industry (Kesler 2002). A leading prostitute’s rights organization, Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE), claims that most of the problems associated with sex work are directly related to the stigma attached to sex work and the prohibition of sex industry (Jenness 1990). Some liberal feminists acknowledge that some sex workers can have less independence while working for a pimp. But others, such as call girls, certainly have more power and a degree of independence greater than in many other forms of women’s work (Satz 1995).

According to Satz (1995:66), many critics of prostitution have assumed that all prostitutes entered the sex industry under circumstances of abuse and economic desperation. While it can be applied to street prostitutes who are more likely to enter the

sex trade due to personal abuse and financial instability, other types of sex workers such as call girls, exotic dancers, and porn stars may enter the industry for other reasons. To support this claim, the author provides statistics, disclosing that although street prostitutes are the most visible and vulnerable sex workers, they constitute only about 20 percent of the prostitute population in the United States. Therefore, sex work can exist in a variety of contexts and cannot be perceived as “one monolithic thing.”

The sex workers’ rights organization COYOTE also distinguishes between cases when people voluntarily chose to enter the sex industry as a professional occupation and those who are being forced into the sex industry to survive. The organization’s leaders emphasize that “prohibition of prostitution promotes disrespect for women, promotes violence and promotes rape” (Jenness 1990:412). According to liberal feminists, until prostitution is legitimized, the issue of forced prostitution is not going to be resolved. The current prohibition on prostitution in most states of the U.S. makes those who engage in sex work extremely vulnerable (Satz 1995). Moreover, sex workers are disproportionately punished by the criminal justice system for engaging in commercial sex acts. Many states prosecute sex workers but not pimps and clients, making it a worse crime to sell sex than to buy it. Further, the prohibition of prostitution fuels a negative image of sex workers in the industry. For these reasons, liberal feminists advocate for legalization or decriminalization of prostitution, so sex workers can pursue their careers with their rights being recognized and protected under the law (Jenness 1990). Liberal feminists claim that instead of the laws against pimping and pandering, labor laws are much needed to regulate working conditions and third-party

owned prostitution businesses. As workers, prostitutes should be free of violation of their civil rights.

This chapter discussed the recent emergence of the webcam modeling industry. It also examined the opposing feminist perspectives on the sex industry and experiences of sex workers. The oppression paradigm holds that prostitution is a direct consequence of the patriarchal gender values. As such, it focuses primarily on women (not men or transgender people) as prostitutes. It employs a victim-oriented approach, emphasizing the lack of women's agency and the degrading and harmful consequences of prostitution for all women. Proponents of this perspective want to abolish the sex industry as a whole.

On the other hand, proponents of the liberal feminist approach view sex work from the position of empowerment and liberation. They recognize that most sex workers make a voluntary choice to enter the sex industry as a professional occupation. The empowerment paradigm highlights the necessity of labor laws for sex workers as well as regulation of the sex industry much as any industry is regulated.

Both perspectives are one-dimensional and equally extreme. Whenever there is a polarization of views, there is a probability that the truth lies somewhere in between. The most recent development in the feminist sex war is the emergence of a polymorphous paradigm - a middle approach that seeks to integrate aspects from two polar perspectives, avoiding radical viewpoints. It holds that there is a "constellation of occupational arrangements, power relations, and worker experiences" in the sex industry (Weitzer 2009:215).

This study will investigate if the camgirls industry is either an empowering or an exploitative form of women's labor or rather if it combines elements from both perspectives and represents the uneven distribution of agency, subordination, and job satisfaction of workers in the sex industry.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

### *Research Perspective*

This study is a qualitative research project based on the theoretical perspective of social constructionism, which “is interested in routines of everyday life and in the making of social reality” (Flick 2018:12). Several social constructionist approaches can be used to examine reality. This study adopted a framework of social constructivism proposed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (2002). The authors stressed that the reality of everyday life is not possible without constant communication between individuals. They emphasize the intersubjective nature of this interaction – the correspondence between one person’s meaning of the world and another person’s meaning of the world. This allows for the creation of a common understanding of reality. This theoretical approach enables an analysis of the social world through exploration, reflection, and evaluation; it enables the researcher to (co-)construct knowledge based on past experiences and in collaboration with others. According to Blumer (1969), only through qualitative research can we understand human actions and access the symbols and meanings attributed to these acts. Applying the social constructivism perspective to the study of the camgirls’ experiences in the online sex industry will help me expose whether or not aspects of the industry make it empowering or exploitative for the women in the industry.

### *Research Site*

This study examined empowering and exploitive aspects of women’s labor in the camgirls’ industry. Various online websites broadcast online performances of erotic content. According to statistics from Topchat.com, which reviews the best live cam

websites around the world, the websites with the highest traffic of customers and the greatest number of performing camgirls in 2019 are MyFreeCams, LiveJasmin, Chaturbate, and ImLive (Topchat 2019). These websites have different interfaces, categories, price policies and payment methods. However, the concept of these websites is the same – broadcasting the camgirls’ live performances for customers all over the world who have selected them according to profile images or the content of the camgirls’ personal pages. Due to the limited time and resources of this project, this study focused in-depth on one of the top websites LiveJasmin.com, which in December 2018 hosted over 10,000 camgirls. By focusing on LiveJasmin.com, I was able to provide an in-depth analysis of one business in the web model industry and explore the experiences of camgirls on this website. Because cam models typically register on different online platforms to increase the traffic of customers and their potential income, focusing on the cam models on LiveJasmin.com yielded some insights about other cam modeling websites, while also providing insights about the camgirl industry more broadly.

LiveJasmin.com hosts cam models in ten different categories. Due to time constraints, this study focused on three broadcasting categories typical for the majority of the live broadcasting websites: “Newbie,” “Fetish,” and “Hot Flirt.” The categories represent the diversity of camgirls and reflect various customers’ demands for the live shows with cam models, which provided diverse and comparative data for the project. Focusing on three categories also highlighted different experiences of camgirls based on different demands and expectations of customers from each category.

The category “Newbie” emphasizes the “new” status of its models who have supposedly recently joined the camgirl industry and the website. It likely attracts customers who might be looking for new faces or those who have become quite blasé about the regular cam models with whom they have previously interacted. It could also attract customers who are looking for less experienced women, who don’t already know the rules of “the game” and its pitfalls. As a general rule, cam models are prohibited from exposing nudity in open sessions of any category. Models in the category “Newbie” are allowed to provide erotic content and expose nudity in private sessions, based on their individual willingness and the customers’ requests.

The category “Fetish” refers to a category where customers’ fulfill their secret dreams and “extreme undertakings.” Similar to “Newbie” category, camgirls in “Fetish” can perform nude, erotic shows during private sessions with customers, again according to the willingness of each model (LiveJasmin 2019). Typically, the models in this category fall into two fetish styles: dominating mistress and submissive slave. A dominating model controls the show and reigns in her customers who want to worship their mistress. A submissive model performs the role of a slave who serves the customers and fulfills their requests. According to the LiveJasmin’s policy, the category “Fetish” requires models to wear fetish garment such as latex, leather, spandex, and accessories such as masks, chains, high heels, locks, rings, jewelry, and toys. The models in this category also are required to wear a lot of makeup and dark colors (red, black, purple).

When using the “Hot Flirt” category, customers expect to be seduced, such as during a night out in the club. The image of the cam model in this category is one of a

“sexy woman who needs to be conquered” (LiveJasmin 2019). The models are required to wear seductive clothing such as short skirts and cocktail dresses but not overly transparent outfits such as lingerie. In private sessions with customers, camgirls are free to decide what kind of show they are willing to provide, including erotic content and nudity.

### *Research Design*

To investigate the phenomenon of the camgirls industry, I addressed the following research questions:

- (1) What is the camgirl industry?*
- (2) What aspects of the camgirl industry make it empowering for female cam models?*
- (3) What aspects of the camgirl industry make it exploitative for female cam models?*

To answer these research questions, I applied a qualitative approach that allowed me to collect rich, descriptive information to understand the phenomenon of the camming industry. According to Flick (2018:10), qualitative research is intended to approach the world “out there” to understand social phenomenon from the inside. I employed a two-stage research design. First, I conducted ethnographic observations of camgirls’ open video sessions on the website LiveJasmin.com. Second, I conducted in-depth interviews via Skype with cam models, who at some point in their life broadcasted adult performances on different camming websites.

Ethnographic observation allows the researcher to gather qualitative information about a setting and usually requires the researcher’s immersion in a social or cultural



context via close and detailed attention to it (Coffey 2018:6). In order to understand the phenomenon of the camgirl industry, I conducted ethnographic observations of the three categories, “Newbie,” “Fetish,” and “Hot Flirt” on the website LiveJasmin.com. While female, male and transgender web models broadcast their performances on the platform of LiveJasmin.com, as noted earlier, due to the limited time and resources, this study focused only on female camgirls.

I conducted over nine hours of observations, approximately three hours of observation for each of the three categories discussed above. My initial research design proposed that I spend 30 minutes observing each video session. However, each observation that I conducted lasted from eight to forty-seven minutes. This difference in the length of sessions was due to several factors. While observing open video sessions, oftentimes camgirls were taken to private chats by customers, automatically disconnecting me from their open sessions. Thus, I had to find another cam model within the same category to get a desired number of total minutes. Other times, a camgirl would end the video session herself because she either needed to take a break or was done with her work for that day, which also kicked me out of her room. I stayed in some video chats longer than the initially planned 30 minutes because I wanted to capture a performance that caught my attention or an interesting conversation with a customer(s).

To obtain diverse data representative of the industry as a whole, the sample included camgirls from different ethnic groups from each of the afore-mentioned categories: White, Hispanic, and African American. LiveJasmin.com does not distinguish camgirls based on their ethnicity within performing categories and only

displays the information about the language that camgirls speak or prefer to speak. Initially, I planned to conduct an equal amount of observation time for each ethnic/racial group within each performing category, based on my personal judgment of models' visual appearance as to which race and ethnicity she belongs to. However, it proved difficult. During their performances, some cam models wore wigs and a lot of makeup what made it hard to visually assess their ethnicities. Also, while all camgirls had sound turned on in the rooms, not all models were talking during their sessions, which made it impossible to make assumptions about their native languages. Ultimately, I observed for three or more hours in each of the three categories and omitted the racial/ethnic breakdown I had initially proposed.

During the observations, I focused on the models' interactions with customers, including their responses (or lack of responses) to customers, their body language, and their facial expressions. I also focused on the language that customers used while interacting with cam models and each other in their chatrooms. However, I was not able to provide a deep analysis of customers and their demeanors because of their limited presence in the chatrooms, which is limited to their nicknames. In addition to the observation of web model – client interactions, I also examined each cam models' room settings and personal pages which included photos, recorded videos, and self-descriptions. During video sessions I recorded my observations using the program QuickTime Player and employed an Observation Guide to capture details and impressions during observations, which provided me with rich information for analysis (see Appendix A).

To answer the research questions about empowering and exploitative aspects of the camgirls' industry, I conducted eight in-depth interviews with cam models. A qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view and to unfold the meaning of people's experiences (Flick 2018). In-depth interviews also allow participants to communicate much more freely and provide more detailed descriptions than semi-structured or structured survey interviews.

For the interview population, my initial goal was to recruit 12 to 15 participants from the performing categories "Newbie," "Fetish," and "Hot Flirt" from LiveJasmin.com to match the sample of participants in ethnographic observations. I applied purposive sampling to identify the interviewees in each category. My first method of recruitment of the initial interviewees was sending a message offering to participate in my research project to cam models in categories "Newbie," "Fetish," and "Hot Flirt." However, when I attempted to send the message to several camgirls through their personal pages at LiveJasmin.com, I found out that majority of them set such a high price for private messaging that I was unable to afford to use this recruitment method. After I encountered difficulties with recruiting sufficient interview subjects from Livejasmin.com, I turned to the website WeCamgirls.com which is a popular forum in the cam model community to find further interviewees. Despite this fact, it was appropriate to include cam models from different websites in my sample because they represent the camgirls' industry as a whole and share common experiences of broadcasting live performances online.

After I registered myself at WeCamgirls forum as a potential cam model, I was able to send private messages to other camgirls (Appendix D). I sent out approximately

30 messages to cam models who had a private messaging option set on their page (some camgirls prefer to turn off this option). I was able to complete two Skype interviews with cam models who responded to my message. While exploring camgirls' accounts on the WeCamgirls, I found out that majority of them promote their camming pages via Twitter accounts. Twitter became my third method of recruitment. By searching for "camshows," "camgirl," "streamer" and other hashtags relevant to the industry hashtags, I was able to get ahold of one hundred and six camgirls. I received eight responses from camgirls, and I was able to complete three interviews via Skype.

I recruited the rest of the participants using a snowball sampling technique. I asked all of my interviewees if they could refer me to other cam models who might be willing to participate in my study. Thus, for instance, Olivia, whom I recruited from Twitter, put me in contact with Piper (see table below). I recruited my last two participants through my acquaintance, a cam model herself, who declined the offer to participate in my study; however, she was able to put me in contact with Irina and Svetlana. The table below displays cam models' background and characteristics.

Table 1. Interviewees' Nicknames and Selected Characteristics

Nickname	Country of Origin	Broadcasting Country	Occupation prior Camming	Performing Websites	Performing Solo and/or with a Partner
Olivia	United States	United States	Stripper	Chaturbate Skype Private MyFreeCams	Solo and with a partner
Caroline	United States	United States	Call Center Supervisor	Chaturbate Streamate	Solo and with a partner
Piper	United States	United States	Care Provider	MyFreeCams MyFreeCamsShare	Solo and with a partner
Claire	United States	United States	CNA	OnlyFans Snapchat	Solo and with a partner
Emily	Canada	Canada	Restaurant Manager	Streamate	Solo
Ashley	United States	South Korea	Freelance Writer	Chaturbate Stripchat	Solo
Svetlana	Russia	Russia	Casino Croupier	CamContacts	Solo
Irina	Russia	Russia	Retail Associate	LiveJasmin ImLive	Solo

To show my gratitude for their participation in my study, I sent \$30 from my own budget to all interviewees but one. I was not able to transfer the money to Emily from Canada either via PayPal or CashApp, due to the country's strict regulations of online payment transactions to sex workers. However, Emily agreed to participate in my study without compensation because she said she believed in the importance of my research.

Recruitment of the participants was one of the most challenging and time-consuming stages of my project. It was difficult to find cam models who would be willing to talk to me about their experiences. In addition, after rescheduling the interview date several times, a few camgirls never followed up with me.

Choosing a two-stage research design was intentional. By incorporating both ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews, I gained a more comprehensive understanding of the camgirls' industry. These two methods are compatible. The observations directed me to some issues that I discussed with my interviewees and interviewing of camgirls assisted in the interpretation of the observational findings. Ethnographic observations provided useful data about camgirls' behavioral strategies in interactions with customers in natural settings and gave a better understanding about how the industry works. In-depth interviews with camgirls provided information about their expert understanding of the industry, their experiences within it and personal choices. These two types of data complemented each other and made the data set more robust.

#### *Data Quality*

To improve data quality, I employed several methods. First, the study and its materials were approved by the University of Montana Institutional Review Board, which

enhanced its credibility. Second, during ethnographic observations, besides recording them with QuickTime Player, I used the Observation Guide to capture my impressions and important details in a comprehensive and uniform way. Third, after I obtained consent from the interview subjects, the in-depth interviews were recorded with QuickTime Player, which provided more accurate data for analysis and made the process of transcribing more efficient. Fourth, the data set from the in-depth interviews was coded with software NVivo, which has been designed for qualitative research to work with rich text-based and multimedia information. This helped to ensure the quality of my coding and subsequent analysis.

### *Ethical Issues*

An interview inquiry is a moral enterprise. Human interactions in interviews affect the interviewees “because of the complexities of researching of private lives” (Flick 2018:28). By undertaking this study as a researcher, I aimed to serve scientific and human interests. Therefore, I took several steps to avoid possible ethical issues while conducting this research.

The project was reviewed and approved by the University of Montana Institutional Review Board. Prior to the interviews, all participants were notified that their privacy will be protected in all published and written data resulting from this study. Additionally, all participants signed an IRB informed consent form that emphasized confidentiality and lack of harm from participation in the research (see Appendix B). I sent the informed consent form to the interviewees via email, Skype or Twitter. After the form was signed either by hand or with an electronic signature, the participants sent it back to me in a JPEG format. All interviewees were asked for permission to audio and

video record their interview sessions. As a part of the informed consent form, I informed interviewees about their rights to decline participation or to withdraw from the research at any moment. To protect participants' anonymity, each cam model was assigned a pseudonym, so that her real name was eliminated from the data analysis and write up.

To secure all the documents, recordings, and materials related to this study, I used a separate disk on my personal computer which is secured with a password. In addition, I stored a copy of the thesis related materials to a USB drive with the creation of a master password which I keep in my personal desk at home. I have kept the signed informed consent forms in a separate folder locked in my personal desk at home.

### *Coding and Analysis*

For this research project I conducted eight Skype interviews with cam models and over nine hours of ethnographic observations of camgirls' open video sessions on the platform of the website LiveJasmin.com. Both ethnographic observations and Skype interviews were recorded with QuickTime Player program which lets the researcher take screenshots and screencasts of any selected area of the computer's screen.

The data set from observations included MPEG-4 video and audio files, and handwritten field notes. Due to the limitations of the QuickTime Player to record video and audio in one file, I had to record two separate files for each ethnographic observation: an audio and video file. After I finished conducting the observations and attempted to upload recorded files into NVivo, I discovered some technical issues due to the files' format and size. After unsuccessful attempts to use NVivo for transcription of conducted observations, I decided to primarily focus on the handwritten Observation Guides for the further data analysis.



The data set from Skype interviews resulted in eight recorded MPEG-4 files. Due to the fact that the interviews were conducted via Skype, occasionally I experienced difficulties interpreting what was said because of presence of other people or pets in the room, street noise, or connection issues. I transcribed the interviews into a total of 158 double-spaced, typewritten pages of data. I then used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to code interviews and identify common themes. To develop codes, I used both, “a priori” and open coding approaches (Gibbs 2018). The latter led me to construct a collection of codes, based on previous research and literature, whereas the former helped me to generate unique codes derived from conducted data, “setting aside presuppositions, prejudices and preliminary ideas about phenomena” (Gibbs 2018:62). In analyzing the interviews using NVivo, I developed 55 descriptive and analytical codes and sub-codes. For example, the descriptive code “people pleaser” defined cam models who expressed getting a great level of satisfaction from fulfilling customers’ fantasies and requests. The analytical code “establishing boundaries” captured tactics performed by cam models in their negotiations with customers regarding their limits and (un)willingness to perform certain requests in their “shows.”

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

My analysis of the interviews with cam models and ethnographic observations of camgirls' open video sessions revealed several insights about the camgirl industry. In this section I investigate the phenomenon of the camgirls' world and explain how this industry operates in terms of its rules, payment practices, means of communication between performers and their customers, show types and camming categories. My analysis also indicated that camgirls encounter a full spectrum of experiences of working in a cam modeling industry, ranging from rewarding and liberating to extremely traumatic and life-threatening, which I will detail further in the chapter.

### *What is the Camgirl Industry?*

As noted earlier, my analysis of the highly profitable cam modeling industry "behind the screen" is based on my exploration of the website LiveJasmin.com. LiveJasmin is one of the top adult live video chat sites where customers meet amateur cam models from around the world. In 2013 LiveJasmin was ranked as the 80th most popular site in the United States and 103rd globally (Richtel 2013). Twenty-five million visitors from the United States watch live webcam performances on LiveJasmin every month.

When a customer enters LiveJasmin, hundreds of alluring camgirls' profile photos appear alongside lists of different search categories. Customers can either select a camgirl based on her profile photo or a search category, depending on characteristics that they are looking for: video features (free chat, private chat, VIP show, VibraToy and two-way audio), show type (celebrity, hot flirt, amateur, newbei, girl, mature, fetish, lesbian, couples, porn star, transgirl), language (Spanish, German, Italian, French, English), age (18-22, 22-20, 30-40, 40+), ethnicity (Asian, African

American, Latina, White), appearance (BBW [Big Beautiful Woman], big tits, hairy pussy, petite, piercing, shaved, stockings, tattoo, tiny tits), hair (black hair, blonde, brunette, redhead, long, short), and willingness to perform certain acts (anal sex, close-up, dominant, fingering, live orgasm, sex toys, smoking, striptease, submissive).

Each webcam model also creates her own public profile, which describes her sexual preferences, skills and talents. It can be as innocent as AmandaStar's "Newbie" profile, which advertises her as "lovely, sensual and energizing girl that will charm you with my hypnotizing smile" or as daring as AztekaMistress's "Fetish" profile: "I'll enslave you, and you'll wish for my command. I'll control your mind, soul and torture your body to fulfill my passion!" To attract more visitors, some cam models create several profiles on the same website. Thus, the hostess listed in the category "Hot Flirt" under the nickname DivineLexi4U may also be found in the "Celebrity" section under the nickname BlueEyesLexi. Besides creating several accounts on the same website, models oftentimes register on several websites to increase revenue from live broadcasting. Thus, the majority of cam models whom I interviewed revealed that they work on multiple different platforms. For instance, Caroline, a former call center supervisor from the U.S., streams her performances from both Chaturbate and Streamate, whereas Irina, a former retail employee from Russia, prefers to work on LiveJasmin and ImLive.

The communication between a cam model and her customers in a video chat takes place by means of webcam, oftentimes equipped with a microphone which provides both parties an opportunity to see and hear each other. However, the customer may choose to stay hidden without turning on the camera and communicate with the web model via

text messages in her chat room. Cam models also can control the presence of customers in their video rooms: they can disable customer's video camera or microphone at any given moment. For example, one of my interviewees, Olivia, a former stripper and a cam model from the U.S., emphasized that she could "shut down" or "put on mute" any customer who would talk about "stuff that [she doesn't] really want to talk about."

Video sessions with camgirls typically fall into two main categories: a free chat, which is open to the public, and a private chat, which is a "one-to-one" session during which cam models undress, act out fantasies, or follow the explicit instructions of customers. Typically, in an open, free video session, a cam model interacts with multiple customers with the goal of attracting them in a private chat where she gets paid for her time. In a free session, customers also "bargain" with a camgirl about her willingness to fulfill certain requests in a private session. For example, during my observation of AztekaMistress from the "Fetish" category, guest17 asked her to show him if she was wearing any boots, so he could "lick them" in a private chat. While I was observing the open session of PrettyWoman from a "Newbie" category, a customer Horsepower6 asked her if she "can have a smoke [to smoke a cigarette]," and she agreed to do that in a private chat. Emily, who broadcasts her performances from Canada, described a typical interaction with a customer in her open session:

They come into the free room where I am sitting ... They then tell what they are interested in. They can tip if they wanna' flash of something; there is no below the waist nudity. So, they can get a tip of my ass if there are panties on it or boobs or feet or belly ... And then they tell me what they are looking for. I tell them whether they go in the private ... and then they pay per minute until we done.

On LiveJasmin, guests have to create an account to purchase credits to be able to take cam models to private sessions. By signing up, a guest can create a unique nickname

that will identify him or her as a potentially paying customer among other visitors in a chat. LiveJasmin encourages its customers to enroll in the “Club Elite” Loyalty Program where they can earn different titles by using the websites’ services and features. Thus, a customer who spends 15,000 points a month in cam models’ video chats can enjoy the benefits of “Casanova” status:

A big-time member deserves special treatments, and boy, you will get it! See models’ faces light up when you enter the room and hear their voice slightly tremble when purring you name (LiveJasmin 2019).

According to the rules of LiveJasmin, a maximum of six customers is allowed in a private chat with one camgirl at the same time. If a camgirl has several people in her private sessions, she is supposed to give priority to the customer who entered the room first. Interestingly, the rules of LiveJasmin state that if a cam model agrees to perform certain customer’s requests but at some point during a private session she refuses to fulfill them, her earnings from that particular show will be refunded to the customer, no matter how much time they have already spent in the private chat.

The price range for private video sessions with cam models on LiveJasmin varies from \$0.01 up to \$9.99 per video minute. A camgirl sets her rates independently and can adjust them on a daily basis, raising or lowering the price, anticipating the stream of customers. The percentage LiveJasmin cam models make is based on a tiered system. Cam models in the lowest tier keep 30 percent of their overall earnings, whereas camgirls in the highest tier are entitled to 60 percent. In order to reach the 60 percent tier, a cam model must be earning at least \$2,500 per pay period (\$5,000 per month). After the website deducts its share from the camgirl’s revenue, it transfers the remainder through a standard electronic banking transfer or online payment services,

typically on a bi-weekly basis. Cam models who work from studio settings have to deduct a certain percent from their earnings to a studio owner who provides them with a working space, equipment and Internet. According to Irina from Russia, her studio owner kept as much as 50 percent of her earnings. After the website and studio deductions, cam models from the lowest paying tier on LiveJasmin receive only 15 percent from their overall earnings at the end of the pay period.

My observations of camgirls' open video sessions on the website LiveJasmin revealed that cam models broadcast their performances from a variety of settings. Some cam models broadcasted from rooms that looked like a typical bedroom setting, whereas others performed from professionally staged rooms. For example, the bedroom of Alis from the "Hot Flirt" category reminded me of a pompous salon in the Palace of Versailles: the gilded bronze decoration on the walls matched the decoration of the massive golden mirror frame, the fabrics on the bed and even the designs on the pillowcases. It was hard to imagine that the cam model actually lived in this extravagant space. On the other hand, the room of HotDirtySubForU looked shabby and cheap: the cam model was broadcasting her "show" while sitting on the floor that was covered with a thin blanket. Leather belts and metal chains were hanging on the wrinkled red curtain that created an imaginary wall behind her. Two pairs of leather boots and a plastic bathroom storage shelf full of sex toys were located on her right.

Observations of camgirls' video rooms revealed that some cam models broadcast their shows from similar if not identical-looking settings: the same interior, furniture, wall decorations etc. I assumed that some camgirls worked from shared apartment or studio, which was confirmed by my interviews. Both Russian cam models

in my data set revealed that they worked in studio settings. According to Svetlana, a former casino croupier, her studio was “an apartment in the building, divided by sections.” A studio administrator helped to run a camming business, “taking care of everything, like apartments, Internet, computers, cameras, photo sessions.” Irina, a former retail employee, was working in a studio which had “a manager who would control” them and a translator, who helped cam models to interact with foreign customers:

At studio, there was a girl who would help us with language, because it was a language barrier and I didn’t speak much English at that time. I didn’t know anything about that; I just knew a few words from the school program.

The rest of the women in my data set chose to work from the comfort of their own homes. As Ashley, an American freelance writer who broadcasted her performances from South Korea, revealed: “This is my room. I choose to do this, do this my way, in my house, with my music.”

Customers can also access a different type of content on camming websites. Besides their video sessions, camgirls create photo and video galleries as an additional way to make money. While some content is open to the public and customers can view it at any time for free, other uploaded photos and videos are considered to be “premium content” that requires extra payment to access. LiveJasmin promotes different options that facilitate interactions between customers and cam models. Customers can “surprise a model” by sending her a money gift while she is broadcasting her show in a free or private chat. Customers can also play interactive games and vote for camgirls so that they can participate in award contests. Based on customers’ votes, LiveJasmin awards each of its Top 100 camgirls with \$100 on a weekly basis. Cam models can also win

money prizes of up to \$5,000 in a monthly contest for the best video. To produce substantial revenue from a broadcasting of live performances, LiveJasmin provides its cam models with a variety of opportunities and features such as rate options, tips, tokens and gifts from users, promotional games and events.

Collectively the observations of camgirls' video sessions and interviews with cam models added depth to my understanding of the camgirl industry. The online camming platforms provide a unique opportunity to fulfill customers' sexual desires and create a kind of virtual intimacy for customers for whom it might not be accessible in real life. At the same time, the opportunity to earn a substantial income with a minimum investment attracts thousands of women into the webcam business. In the next section, I will explore the most important empowering and exploitative aspects of the camming industry based on eight in-depth interviews with camgirls.

### *Camgirls' Industry as Empowerment*

In terms of the positives, all of my interviewees talked about different aspects of the industry that offer them numerous opportunities that "normal" occupations would not be able to provide them with. Many cam models talked about how working in the industry ensures their financial independence and offers a flexible work schedule while providing an opportunity to explore their own sexuality and creativity. Some women described cam modeling as an avenue of "trying on" different identities and performing variety of social roles. Creating their own brand within sex industry and becoming "pornterpreneurs" was another important aspect mentioned by some cam models. Building romantic relationships or lasting friendship within a camming community was



mentioned by the vast majority of interviewees as an essential factor of working in the industry.

*Financial independence.*

Interviewees in the data set came from different social and economic backgrounds. For instance, Emily was working in restaurant management before she started camming; Olivia was a stripper at a local strip club; Claire is still pursuing a college degree while working as a part-time CNA; Irina came from retail. Despite different backgrounds, all interviewees revealed that camming allow them to take control of their income. According to Piper, a former care provider from the U.S., working as a cam model was a way “to actually put some money down” while working from home in “underwear.” Some women like Claire, described camming as a way to make “a little bit of extra money on my own schedule.” For others, it was a way to maintain financial stability. The majority of camgirls perceived camming as a full-time job and a steady source of income. As Svetlana, a former casino croupier from Russia, explained “it was amazing just being able to pay my rent, to go out and pay for my stuff, to be able to go to restaurants. It was just great.”

Interestingly, both Russian cam models talked about a financial aspect that was not mentioned in any other interviews. Svetlana, a former casino croupier, and Irina, a former retail employee, emphasized that this job provided them with the financial opportunity to travel around the world and explore different cultures. As Irina noticed, she “would never be able to do it with a regular job in her town.”

While discussing their income from camming, women shared that they can make a significant amount of money for a few hours of working on camera. For example, Olivia noted that she could earn “\$400 a night;” Emily was making as much as “a hundred dollars in hour.” Ashley, an American freelance writer who broadcasted her performances from South Korea, revealed making “\$300 for about four hours of camming.” The majority of cam girls make far more than a minimum wage in any state, which makes working in the camming industry incomparable with “normal” full-time jobs, at least in terms of income. Caroline, a former call center supervisor from the U.S., put it this way: “If I was working elsewhere, I’d be like: ‘What am I doing?’ My time would be worth so much more if I was at home working on something else (referring to camming).”

Only three women in my sample revealed having experienced difficult financial conditions prior entering cam modeling. For example, Piper experienced “a lack of resources to drive into town to have a job.” However, these findings do not confirm the widespread view among radical feminists such as Dworkin (1985), MacKinnon (1988), and Snyder (2008) who claim that no woman would choose to work in a sex industry if she had a better option and less difficult life circumstances. While the financial benefits of becoming cam models were attractive for many camgirls, several women in my data set got involved in the industry because it offers a flexible work schedule.

#### *Flexible schedule.*

One of the U.S. web models, Claire, mentioned that having opportunity to work whenever she has “the time and [is] in the mood” as a crucial advantage of camming. Being your own boss and having control over working hours were underlying themes in

a vast majority of interviews. According to Ashley, the ability to decide what “my schedule is going to be every single day” provided her with the opportunity to combine work with daily domestic chores. Lack of fixed office schedule made camgirls unconsciously exercise some sort of time management strategies. As Emily pointed out “[when] my eyes are getting sore looking at the computer screen, I need to take a short break, and I can go put a little laundry in or I can go prep a dinner.” Having spare time to perform activities that they were not able to do while working “normal” jobs, was another important aspect of flexible schedule mentioned by some camgirls. “I don’t buy creamer anymore,” Piper, a former care provider, explained, “I make it out of oat milk, so I have time to make my oat milk in the morning.” On the other hand, for some cam models it was important to stay organized and to follow a schedule that they created for themselves. Trying to find a balance between work and home was found to be challenging for several women. According to Caroline:

... just being at home, distracted by Netflix, your computer and video games. It’s easy to be comfortable at home and stay in your PJ’s and not get ready for work. Getting up at a certain time and making sure your make up is ready and you are dressed to get on certain hours every day. It’s definitely a struggle for me to just figure out how I want my workdays to be and make sure that I am setting the right boundaries, for sure. It’s easy to always be working.

For Caroline, work and home had melded into one thing. Because cam models do not go to work and then come back home, it was challenging for some of them to keep a healthy balance and to avoid constant overworking. According to Emily, being her own administrator created a pressure “that I should work because I don’t have anything else I have to do.” During my ethnographic observations of camgirls’ video sessions on the website LiveJasmin.com, I discovered the same pattern of “overworking.” During her video session, a cam model Maria from the “Hot Flirt” category was asked by a

customer why she was drinking a Red Bull. She responded that she had been working for 16 hours already, which is far beyond a 9-to-5 office work schedule.

Along with advantages of flexible work schedule, working in web camming requires a high level of organizational skills such as overcoming procrastination, prioritizing work and multitasking in order to succeed in this highly competitive industry. The majority of women I interviewed perceived camming as a full-time job and invested significant amount of time and effort to start and maintain their own online business.

*“Pornterpreneurship.”*

The camming industry provides an opportunity for its workers to create their own brand, which emerges around the unique personalities of cam models. According to Caroline, camming allowed her “to carve out a niche for [her]self.” The vast majority of cam models emphasized that despite the belief that camming is an easy way to make money, it takes a lot of dedication to create a profitable business. As Emily said:

People think that you just have to sit and be pretty and folks just gonna’ throw money at you, but you are doing your own PR, HR, accounting, marketing, advertising, running photoshoots, new products, coming up with creative ways to do things.

Emily’s quote clearly indicates the effort that cam models have to put in to be successful entrepreneurs. Further, a few camgirls mentioned that oftentimes camming served as a starting platform which provided them with the opportunity to expand their business and make money outside of online performances. Once they have entered camming, it is a widespread practice for cam models to look for additional avenues of income within the sex industry. As Caroline explained it, “we kinda’ have a whole recipe of our online porno business that has branched out from cam modeling.” Some interviewees mentioned selling recorded video shows to customers via different platforms such as

Premium Snapchat and Skype Private, sexting, selling lingerie, creating websites with erotic content, and phone sex as additional sources of their income. Several cam models expanded their job to the offline world and met with their customers in person. However, it is not always required from cam girls to perform sexual services for customers. According to Irina, sometimes her online customers would come to Russia as tourists and would ask her to be their guide in exchange for “some tokens or concessions.” Sometimes customers invited her to travel abroad at their expense to escort them during their trips.

It is not always a business within the sex industry that cam models are engaged in. For example, Olivia, a former stripper, explained that working in the cam modeling industry requires her “to be on top of all these social media profiles.” Running her online camming business helped her to develop certain skills that she was able to apply outside of the industry in social media consulting and the organization of charity campaigns.

For a vast majority of cam models in my study, camming is a starting platform to generate income which provides them with different options of how to expand their own brand. In addition, different means of interactions with customers via multiple platforms allow some cam models to rediscover and express their own sexuality.

#### *Exploring their own sexuality.*

Several cam models in my data set, such as Emily and Caroline, described themselves as being open-minded personality types prior to their entry into the sex industry. On the other hand, the other camgirls, like Svetlana from Russia and Ashley who broadcasts from South Korea, described themselves as “really shy” or “not really

open” before they started working in camming. Despite this difference in personality traits, the majority of the women emphasized that working in the industry helped them to boost their self- confidence and self-esteem. As Claire explained, “it’s hard to feel unattractive when you are getting comments that are like ‘You are perfect!’ frequently.” Recognizing that men enjoy watching their bodies facilitated the transformation of some cam models from an “awkward” to “a sexy girl.” In addition, this transformation created in some camgirls, like Piper, a desire “to explore that [sexy] side of me.” Describing her experiences with customers, Irina said that sometimes she would reduce the prices of video sessions for certain members “just to enjoy myself.” As she explained:

When he entered my chat, he entered with his video camera; I was able to see him. He was a young, pretty looking guy, and I was like, I felt like attraction to him as well.

Four of the camgirls I interviewed revealed that in addition to their solo performances, they also broadcast online their shows with their romantic partners. These cam models described how working together with their partners on camera improved their sexual relationships and helped them to overcome some barriers that they had faced in their sexual lives offline. As Olivia explained:

We’ve had such a hard time in our personal life to get her [her partner] to talk to me, because I am a sub [submissive]. And when the camera turns on and people start tipping, she is like “Sit.” And I am like “Cool! This is fun.” We’ll just be really playful and make out.

On the other hand, Caroline revealed having “amazing sex” with her partner in real life prior to entering the camming business. The desire “to explore [their] sexuality together,” as well as the aspiration to share their sexual experiences with others, led Caroline and her partner to the idea of filming their own porn:

We would watch porn in a Playboy channel on TV and we would often make fun of it together, like how ridiculous it was and how we were having better sex than in a porn that we were watching.

Caroline and her partner invited another female to participate in their shows and launched the brand “My Perfect Harem.” They used different camming platforms to promote their new page to “create a fan base” with the subsequent goal of “making a name for [them]selves” in the pornography industry. According to Caroline, the idea that other people can receive satisfaction from watching her sexual experiments as well as fulfilling customers’ personal requests was one of the most rewarding aspects of the cam modeling industry for her:

I am such a people pleaser; I’ve really always been that way. I get a lot of joy out of seeing someone else happy. When I made homemade gifts or homemade cookies for someone, it was always more appreciated than if you got them a gift card. And it’s the same with cam modeling for me. And that’s why I really love doing private shows now ‘cause it’s one-on-one, and someone gets to share with me what they wanna’ see, what their fantasy is. And I get to fulfill that, and I get to know they had a great time. They really enjoyed themselves; I made their day. I get great feedback all the time from people, so I really enjoy that part of it. That’s the job satisfaction for me.

Since their entrance into cam modeling industry, several camgirls in my study experienced the transformation of their own sexuality as well as the improvement of their self-confidence and sex lives. These findings align with the arguments of sex-positive feminists such as Rubin (1984), Jenness (1990) and Satz (1995) who claim that sex work can be a path to sexual liberation for some women.

#### *The camming community.*

According to my interviews, cam models do not enter the sex industry looking to build new friendships. Typically, they are driven to camming by other reasons: financial independence, a desire for a flexible work schedule, and expressing their own sexuality.

However, after cam models become a part of a camming community, developing close friendships become one of the most rewarding aspects of working in the industry. In their interviews, cam models revealed that there are two types of lasting connections that they establish within the community: relationships with their customers and bonding with other camgirls.

*Relationships with customers.*

Every woman that I interviewed emphasized developing and maintaining friendships with some of their customers as one of the benefits of working in camming. According to my interviewees, customers sometimes became devoted fans of a particular cam model. It often happens because some cam models, like Caroline, could satisfy customer's particular demands or fetishes so that they "don't have to go browse through bunch of other people to find what they want." In other cases, when patterns of intimacy emerge between camgirls and their customers, they connect on a personal level as it often happens in the offline world. For instance, when discussing her experiences with customers, Svetlana explained that she has maintained a good friendship with several customers for many years. She revealed that one of her customers "has helped [her] emotionally many times." Svetlana described him as a friend with whom she can always share problems and to whom she can turn for support. Sharing a deep level of understanding and communication helped transition their internet acquaintanceship to a friendship in the offline world. The same customer later helped Svetlana to gain a temporary international employment in a non-sexual context in Iraq, which gave her valuable work experience. Despite websites' policy which prohibit camgirls interactions with their customers outside of the camming platforms,



half the cam models in my study revealed that they had connected with some of their members off the website. For instance, after Emily met one of her “really good friends” in her video chatroom, she started spending part of a year at his beach house in Northern California. Staying at his house also benefited her financial situation and allowed her “to pay [her] bills here [at home] and to stay there for no cost.” Moreover, Emily and her “camming friend” established such a deep level of loyalty and trust that he even became “a really good friend with [her] husband.”

Another way some customers express their friendship with cam models is by helping them to “police” their open video sessions. Piper put it this way: friendly customers would “chase the [bad] guys out” from her video chat room. Caroline talked about her “legit friend” who eventually “got invited over to [her] house for a Thanksgiving dinner:”

He helped me to run the room, and he helped with the trolls and the mean comments. He would block them, ban them. He will get the other people in the chat help make fun of them, if they [the trolls] say something stupid. He was kinda’ like my cheerleader in there.

During my ethnographic observations in the camgirls’ open video sessions, I noticed how some members would call out other men in a public chat when they would say something inappropriate or offensive to a cam model. For example, while a cam model Patricia from the “Hot Flirt” category was performing a dance in her open video session, a member nicknamed Sert1234 left a message in her chat that said, “She is boring.” Soon after, a customer, Restarttrufus responded with “Bye, Sert,” to show him that he was not welcome in Patricia’s room.

In their interviews, all of the cam models mentioned that they have to deal with inappropriate customers, their rude comments or degrading requests, on a daily basis.

For this reason, the vast majority of the web models in my study valued customers who do not objectify them or “reduce [them] to the status of mere tools for men’s purposes,” even when they didn’t pay for services (Papadaki 2010). As Piper noted, “even if they can’t pay, but they are consistent, they are there. And they are friendly ... and they shower me with complements ... which is nice. That’s what I enjoy watching.”

Interestingly, my analysis of the interviews with Russian cam models disclosed a theme that was not mentioned by any other camgirls in my data set. When describing their relationships with customers, both Irina and Svetlana revealed that after working in the cam modeling for several years, they each began a romantic relationship with one of their customers and eventually got married to them. Irina and Svetlana shared something in common—they both said that they lacked sympathy to Russian men prior entering cam modeling. After they started to interact with foreign customers in video sessions, their disaffection with Russian men started to grow. As Irina explained:

I had relationships in Russia with Russian men, but it didn’t work out. And I didn’t really have feelings for them anymore, while I know other men, how they treat women. So, that was my goal to find a foreign man, who would really appreciate who I am, what I do and will treat each other with respect [sic].

Similar to Irina, Svetlana also expressed negative attitudes toward Russian men: “The first time I actually met people from other countries, I didn’t like Russian guys.” My Russian background and familiarity with the country’s cultural and societal norms makes me assume that these camgirls neglected men from their own country due to the gender discrimination or treatment that they experienced from Russian men in the private and/or public sphere. In Russia’s patriarchal society most people still consider women as a lower class and subordinate to men. The cultural differences in attitudes towards women and their sex roles surfaced out as soon as Svetlana and Irina started to interact

with foreign customers via camming platforms. The difference between how foreign men treated women (even while working in the sex industry!) made camgirls realize that a camming platform can be an avenue to find romantic relationships. According to Irina, finding “her soulmate” became her goal that required “plenty of time and patience.”

Maybe some women would say it’s not realistic, but for me, it was very realistic goal in doing what I do and to continue working there, it’s to find a compatible man for me, who will know me for who I am without any hidden things and about whom I would know what he wants, what he likes, and maybe it will work out. So, every time I was working there, I was hoping and believing in that. That’s why I spent plenty of time, sitting there, waiting for that day and that time, and it apparently came. It took us a while, maybe three-four years, when it happened when we got married. I reached my goal and I am very glad and happy because the time wasn’t wasted. It took time to find him, but, again, who believes in that—it can happen [sic].

Irina’s revelation sounded like a well-thought-out plan. However, she added another important aspect later in her interview:

For me, it was the main qualities that a person is good, kind, not greedy and won’t be able to hurt a woman. ... religious aspects ... of course, social status, yes, it played a role because I wouldn’t be able to be with a criminal, somebody who is criminal, no. But for me, the most important things were like character traits that would be suitable for me [sic].

This quote emphasized Irina’s priorities for her life partner: a good character was more important to her than his financial status. For Irina, who decided to look for a serious relationship in the industry that revolves around money, wealth of her potential partner was not the deciding factor.

Unlike Irina, Svetlana did not thoroughly plan to find a mate through camming. Her online romantic relationships began unexpectedly and caught her off guard. Soon after Svetlana’s soon-to-be husband joined her video chat, their “love began very fast.” They met in real life after several months of online dating, when Svetlana’s boyfriend came to visit her in Russia. According to Svetlana, after “now-my-husband, proposed

me to quit [the camming industry], I did that, and it was really good for me.” Eventually, both of the Russian camgirls in my study quit the camming business and moved in with their spouses who resided outside of Russia.

None of the other cam models in my study mentioned getting involved in romantic relationships with their customers. Moreover, Piper emphasized that cam modeling was never “for flirting,” and noted that nobody in this industry “is looking for a relationship.” Caroline shared a similar perspective in her interview, saying that interactions with her customers never had any sexual or romantic connotation to it; as she explained it: “I don’t really get turned on by their dicks at all.”

The foundation of relationships between camgirls and their customers is shaped by the nature of their online interactions in which many people tend to be more open and comfortable talking about themselves and tend to care less about saving face as they would do in an offline world. Based on roles that customers “carry out” in interactions with cam models, friendships can take different forms: fans, “cheerleaders,” chatroom “guards,” or “legit friends” in the offline world. For some cam models, like the Russian women in my study, friendship with their customers became a foundation of romantic relationships that turned into marriage.

Not only can camgirls and some of their customers develop long-term friendships and romantic relationships but cam models also bond with other cam models through different camming platforms, professional expos and conventions.

#### *Camgirls’ bonding.*

The cam modeling industry is a highly competitive market. Cam models put a lot of effort into creating their unique “camming identities,” setting up their profile pages and

photo and video galleries to attract high-paying customers to their chat rooms.

Discussing a high level of competition between cam models, Piper explained, “you always have to make sure that your eyelashes are perfect and your eyeshadow, and you look like what they want,” so a potentially paying customer will choose your profile among hundreds of others. If a cam model like Piper can fit a highly demanded type of a “platinum blond” who is “a 21-year-old, skinny, sweet, demure, curvy body, maybe a little bit submissive,” her camming business can thrive and grow just based on her physical attractiveness. However, Emily, who is “in [her] late 30s, plus size, and really outspoken,” who described herself as not fitting beauty standards of the camming industry, had to come up with own recipes of how to stand out in “a giant network of blonds.” In her interview, Ashley, an American freelance writer who broadcasts from South Korea, talked about some tricks that camgirls can exercise to attract members to their video chatrooms:

There will be girls that will poach; they will come into your room, and they will be like: “Hey, my room is better, and my rates are cheaper.” And they will poach your best paying customer to their room. I’ve had that happen so much now, it’s ridiculous. I had to block other models from my room because of this.

Based on how some models in my data set described the dynamic within a highly competitive industry, I was curious if relationships between cam models could be described with Olivia’s quote: “sink or swim in the sea full of sharks?”

Surprisingly, all women in my study but one reported that “the community among cam girls is really good.” Once in the industry, cam models connect with each other based on a mutual interest to create successful brands for themselves. Camgirls interact and bond with each other via different platforms in online and offline worlds: camming websites, community forums, Twitter accounts, and national and international

expos and conventions. Caroline explained that establishing relationships with other women in the industry allowed her to share her own experiences and helped her to learn new tricks about this business:

There is no school or classes to teach you how to do it or how to do it right, it's really something that you just kinda' learn and navigate by yourself. I've helped other models to get set up on sites and helped them get started.

Cam models exchange useful information on how to create a successful personal brand, the best payment providers, websites that offer a higher stream of customers, recent shows and conferences in the industry. They also share tips on how to attract customers to private chats where they make the most money, how to make them come back, and how to establish a long-term online relationship with them.

Similar to findings by Abbott (2000) about the sociability of actresses in the porn industry, several cam models in my study revealed that once in the camming industry, their social networks became limited to individuals who are also a part of this subgroup.

As Caroline explained:

All of my friends from five years ago are totally different from the friends that I have now ... That was nice to have other people to talk about work stuff because it can be isolating if you have friends that don't know anything about camming or the adult entertainment industry.

Bonding in the publicly stigmatized camming industry helped some cam models to feel more accepted as other cam models are not prejudiced about what they do. Cam models who work together in camming studios revealed developing even stronger social ties with each other in comparison to independent models who broadcast from their own homes. Both Irina and Svetlana worked in studio settings in Russia, in "apartments" in a building, "divided by sections." As Irina described it:

Some apartments there were wide open, and you could see each other; some apartments were, like, more secluded, and you would be more private there, and you wouldn't see anybody else. You would just hear how other girls talk but nothing you can see [sic].

Russian cam models revealed that they would oftentimes perform their "shows" for customers without any partition from other camgirls, who were working in the same room. Irina and Svetlana described how at first, it was "embarrassing," "a little bit weird and uncomfortable" to do "striptease or reveal your body parts" in front of other cam models because "you cross your limit of shamelessness." However, over time, Irina was able to overcome the feeling of shame and started to feel like "we are all women, we are all in the same boat, and everybody is kinda' doing the same thing." Witnessing how other cam models frequently undressed in front of her, and not being judged for doing the same, provided Irina with a sense of comfort. The "ritual" of undressing in a shared space, this "secret" that cam models were keeping, helped web models to develop strong bonds with other web models, who eventually became friends. Based on her experiences of performing in front of other camgirls, Irina concluded: "It's the same that you will go to sauna, where all women are walking naked and don't feel ashamed."

Svetlana's experiences, however, were different; she was not able to reach the level of comfort that Irina described in her interview. Being surrounded by other camgirls while getting undressed was "very hard," "really strange," and "weird" for a "sensitive" Svetlana. While talking about her experience, Svetlana often took long pauses; it was hard for her to find right words to describe her feelings. Exposing herself in front of other women and performing certain actions that were a part of her "shows" appeared to be one of the most traumatic aspects of working in the camgirl's industry for her. However, despite her discomfort, Svetlana revealed that she had established friendships with

some camgirls in her studio she “just [knew] a little more about their physical appearance, that’s all.” While in private sessions with customers, camgirls from Svetlana’s studio were trying to find “funny stuff around while chatting” to share with each other. Camgirls would often make fun of some customers together, gossiping about their fantasies and “overwhelming” requests. This was another way the cam models bonded with each other while working together in a studio.

My analysis of the interviews revealed that relationships between camgirls in the camming community are layered and complicated. They mix jealousy, competition, support, recognition, and empowerment. While building their personal camming brands, cam models often become team players who share their secrets of success with other cam models. On the other hand, the stigma that surrounds the camming industry often becomes the foundation for the bonds created between those women. The camming community provides a sense of belonging where cam models encouraged each other and escaped from public prejudice. With studio workers, bonding between cam models evolves from mutually experienced feelings of embarrassment and shame into a collective intimacy and true friendship.

Camgirls in my data set talked about several aspects of cam modeling that facilitated their positive experiences of working in the industry: financial independence and flexible work schedule, exploring own sexuality and creativity as well as developing long-term relationships with customers and bonding with other cam models. My analysis also revealed that all cam models have encountered traumatic experiences or instances of ill-treatment while working in the industry.



### *The Hazards of Working in Cam Modeling Industry*

In this section, I discuss the problems and hazards of working in cam modeling industry that negatively impacted camgirls in my study and in some cases led to their exploitation. In their interviews, camgirls discussed how challenges of dealing with stalkers and customers' degrading requests, negotiations with "freeloaders," and body shaming from customers, as well as negative stigma, affected their emotional and psychological well-being.

#### *Stalkers.*

All cam models in my study talked about the challenges that they encounter in establishing boundaries with their customers to distinguish their online work and private life. According to Claire, a CNA from the U.S., members who have paying ability oftentimes "think they can have a level of access to your attention," which expands outside of the camming world. It can become problematic when a customer does not recognize that a storyline that a cam model creates in a video session is not always an extension of her personal life. As Ashley explained, "they don't understand that I am a living human being and I have boundaries; they don't believe that." Furthermore, she provided an example of how one of her regular customers started to express obsessive behaviors and almost "put [her] livelihood in danger" by stalking her on social media:

[He] kept pestering me. Then he came on my Twitter. He was like: "Hey, when are you going live again?" And he would come on my Chaturbate and talk about personal things that I had put on "WeCamgirls" [cam model community and forum]. Like, he almost exposed the fact that I was married to my entire viewership on Chaturbate. And he had no respect for that, and I told him he needed to cut it out because he wasn't supporting me in anyway.

To protect herself from a “terrifying” customer, Ashley had to block him and “report him on every site [she] could.” Similarly, Caroline expressed her irritation with some customers who expect her to “always be available:”

They are in my DMs [direct messages] all the time: “Hey, please reply, reply quicker, why you aren’t replying?” I am like: “I am a busy woman, unless you are paying for my time, I am not your girlfriend!”

In a few cases, stalkers not only bombarded camgirls with constant messages on social media, but also attempted to connect with them in real life. Several cam models revealed that they had customers who would try to find where they live. For example, Olivia was threatened by a few regulars who said that they could “kidnap [her] at any moment.” To protect her privacy, Olivia tried to avoid answering questions about her location and typically would joke around with nosey customers: “West Coast, Best Coast.”

According to many cam models in my study, it was a challenging experience to figure out their own boundaries while dealing with stalkers. My analysis of this issue revealed two general types of camgirls’ personalities: women who could can stick up for themselves while dealing with unwanted persistent customers and cam models who struggled to put customers in their own place. For example, Emily from Canada, who described herself as “far too direct ... quite confident and strong,” has “no problem telling people that they are wrong.” Emily revealed that when she started to work as a cam model, she tried to be more patient and “nice” to potentially paying customers who “think that if they are purchasing [camgirls’] time, they should have full access to them and to treat them like objects.” However, pretty soon she figured out that negotiating styles did not work well for her:

I did it [played nice] for a couple months, and I hated it. I've tried; it was not for me. I don't have that happy, bubbly personality to make social work ... So, it can be really tough for a lot of cam models who aren't really sure how to deal with that.

Similarly, Olivia explained that she had to be very picky with customers because of “how much crap I have to deal with.” She had zero tolerance for “obsessive” customers or people who request a roleplay “to be their mommy.” To establish “control over [her] environment” in video sessions with customers, Olivia “had to turn down a lot of money.”

*“What if I gave you \$20 000?” Customers’ degrading requests.*

Financial pressure was a major factor why some of my interviewees struggled in negotiations with their customers. Customers, who would come to camming websites seeking to fulfill particular fantasies and fetishes oftentimes would not be satisfied with a “No” answer from a cam model because they seemed to be empowered by their paying ability. In pursuing their desire to see requested actions in a video show, some customers would offer alluringly high compensation on top of the official per-minute rates, pushing cam models outside of their comfort zone. Establishing a “no negotiation zone” to protect themselves from humiliating customers’ requests while rejecting good money was one of the main challenges mentioned by all cam models in my study.

For instance, when discussing her path to creating personal healthy boundaries with customers, Piper talked about “underlying negative energies:”

Sometimes guys are like: “I want your ass.” “Can you do water sports?” Some of those are just dicey for me because I am not comfortable ... but if you want that money for the next day to feed yourself, it might be the way you get food the next day.

For Piper, who mentioned that to get a “normal” job, she would need to drive two hours into the nearest town, cam modeling was one of the few options to be financially self-

sufficient. She said that when she “wants the money,” she would try to negotiate with a customer by “tweaking” his “weird” or “dicey” request to make it comfortable enough for her to fulfill:

[And] then sort of be like: “There you go, I sort of did it.” Like, I’d be: “Go find somebody else if you want; I tried.” And that’s how I try to grasp a sexy aspect out of it, because I try to keep it sexy and fun.

However, she also shared a traumatizing experience when her sexual boundaries were pushed outside of her comfort zone. When she had just begun to broadcast her performances, she did not have well-defined limits in regard of sexual fantasies and fetishes. In a private video session, a customer asked her to perform “a show of getting used as a sex toy” which implied “eating-the-ass” of her partner on camera. Since Piper struggled from germaphobia, this request was “a little bit hard” for her. However, together with her partner, they staged the performance to satisfy a customer. While talking about this experience with me, I noticed how Piper appeared to suffer when trying to put a smile on her face to cover up uneasy feelings related to these memories. When I asked her about her feelings and emotions after “the show” was over, she responded by saying:

Um, panic. I went into the bathroom. I took a shower and mouth-washed. I rinsed my mouth multiple times. My phobia took over, and I felt bad. I wanted to leave a nice feeling for my partner and for my client, but at the end, eating was for someone that knows. I don’t like it ... He made it feel really gross because he wanted me to be in a slutty ... gross position. I just lost myself. I had germs on my mouth, and I needed to clean myself. So, I realized that’s a limit for me. Creating that dynamic, like giving my heart and my love and realizing where money sits too, it’s really interesting to discover within myself.

Piper’s quote illustrated how customers can take advantage of cam models in financial need who lack established personal boundaries. Degrading requests can traumatize some camgirls and impact their emotional and psychological well-being. According to

Svetlana, seeing “overwhelming things” on camera also affected her in a negative way afterwards:

I remember the first two weeks of this job; I think I saw more male body parts than I ever saw in my entire life, just in two weeks ... Like, the guy putting a screwdriver inside his genitals until he starts bleeding, you know, it's an awful thing to see when you are in a non-adult section ... you just want to forget it forever.

Similar to Piper and Svetlana, Caroline mentioned that it was “a constant challenge to deal with people that will try to push your boundaries.” Caroline talked about “a grey area” of customers’ demands. Despite that she was “a pretty solid person before [camming],” it was challenging for her to weigh “personal costs” and financial benefits of fulfilling bizarre requests:

People have asked me to do a show that I was like: “Yeah, I guess I can do that,” and then after I did the show I was like: “Yeah, I wasn’t really into that; I didn’t enjoy that.” I don’t know, you get to know yourself a lot better. But it certainly challenges every single aspect of what I am okay with. It took me some time to be able to say like: “No, I am not in the mood for that today, come back tomorrow, I just don’t feel like it.” And that’s seems so simple, but it’s easy to say “yes” when people are there with money.

Similar to a vast majority of cam models in my data set, Caroline emphasized a financial aspect of camming and how money can be a deciding factor to whether overstep personal limits, for example, “put a whole banana in my butt until it disappeared:”

He [a customer] will be like: “What if I’ll give you an extra 20 bucks, what if I’ll give you an extra 50?” Guys will do that too, like: “Hey, can I sleep with you?” I am like: “No, I don’t do any full-service sex work; guys have zero chance of ever being with me—I am online only.” But there are still fans who will be like: “What if I gave you \$10 000?” and I am like: “No, I don’t have a price.” “What if I gave you \$20 000?” And there are certainly people that try to push your boundaries, and you have to learn to stick up for yourself and to be able to say “no” to the money. And that’s not always easy.

To refuse \$20 000 can be certainly challenging for some cam models, especially for those in a situation of financial need. Interestingly, Emily noted that having other

sources of income such as a life coaching business, in addition to camming, gave her “the privilege” to refuse money from disrespectful customers. This example illustrated how financial dependence on cam modeling sometimes reduces women’s freedom of choice in interactions with potentially paying customers. Camgirls must have a certain degree of integrity and well-established personal boundaries, as well as effective negotiation skills to maintain a profitable business and customers’ satisfaction at the same time.

### *Freeloaders.*

In addition to negotiations with paying customers, five interviewees talked about another category of unwelcome members – “freeloaders” who seek free entertainment on camming websites. These customers typically do not have registered accounts and visit camming websites as guests. Such customers who never pay or tip camgirls for their performances can be very annoying and persistent in their requests. For example, Claire discussed her “frustrating” experiences with men, who “are never gonna’ pay” for anything, and they just jump from room to room to see what they can see.” These members would “message her a bunch of times,” “trying to trick [her] into free sexting” while distracting her from potentially paying customers. When Claire tried to explain one of her freeloaders that she cannot talk to him any longer without him “buying anything,” the customer got upset and called her “ugly.” In her interview, Ashley likewise expressed her frustration with “non-payers,” who would come into chat and “out of the blue” they will be like: “All right, take your clothes off, show me your tits now.”

While conducting my ethnographic observations in camgirls’ video chat rooms, I witnessed how a lot of visitors with nicknames usually comprised of the word “guest”

and random numbers, would text to an English-speaking model something in a foreign language, which was out of context in the overall conversations in the chatroom. Some freeloaders would send dozens of messages in a row, keeping the chatroom very busy and making it hard for a model to see the rest of the texts from paying customers. For instance, when I was observing Naomi's video room in the category "Hot Flirt," Guest2 sent her eleven messages, one after another, with the following content: "Very nice," "Wow," "Aarrgh," "And slow?? Fast???" "Heheheheheh," "Wow," "I wish you sit in my face," "Lick u as u order" etc. This bombarding annoyed even me; I could imagine how annoying it might be to camgirls who have to deal with it on a daily basis while still smiling on camera.

A lack of payment from non-paying viewers demotivated camgirls; similarly, freeloaders' typically rude manners and lack of respect for women and their time were also problematic. Svetlana shared her "traumatizing" experiences with non-paying customers who made her "reconsider" her attractiveness. Oftentimes these customers entered her chat room with greetings such as "Show me your boobs" instead of saying "Hello" or "Goodbye." For Svetlana, who described herself as a very sensitive person, it was hard to comprehend why men were so disrespectful to her. Other times, freeloaders would jump into Svetlana's video session just "to check her out" for a few seconds, trying to avoid paying for her video time:

They just go away. They don't say anything; they don't explain themselves. You just start to think: "What's wrong with me?" Why the other girls are getting a one-hour, one hour and a half conversations in sessions, and you are not. I got an eating disorder problem because of that. I was suffering for years afterwards, after that ... I was comparing myself to others. I was thinking that I am not beautiful enough. I was trying different diets. You know, this is not a good thing in taking care of yourself. And then I just became bulimic. It was a conclusion of all

the diets. You are not mentally strong enough. I was overeating; I was making myself vomit. That was bad.

Out of all women in my study, Svetlana suffered from the most severe consequences of working in cam modeling industry. Frequent encounters with freeloaders, who would leave her sessions without explaining themselves made her question her own sexuality. In her quote, Svetlana revealed that she was not “mentally strong enough” and emotionally prepared to cope with disrespectful and inappropriate customers.

On the other hand, Emily, who seemed the most confident and highly opinionated cam model in my study, had a very distinct approach for handling customers who were not ready to pay for her time:

Quite frankly, people come in on the cam site, and they don't even say “Hi” or anything, they just demand: “Oh, show me your tits.” I say: “No, you are a little bit confused about how it works.” You make a request, and then I decide if I am gonna' let you see them or not. But when you come in, and you act like a dick and you are disrespectful to me, you get absolutely nothing except potentially being kicked out of the room and not able to see me ever again. Most of them leave at that point because I am clearly not the kind of person they are looking for, that they can just give demands to.

Despite the striking difference between the experiences of Svetlana and Emily, both discussed the sexual objectification that women are frequently exposed to in the camgirl industry. Paying and non-paying customers treat cam models as objects of sexual desire without regard to their personality and human dignity. Members' requests such as “show me your boobs” or “show me your ass” prior to a simple greeting, were mentioned by a vast majority of my interviewees. According to radical feminists (Kingshott and Jones 2016), male domination over female sexuality is a main source that fuels the sex industry where women's bodies serve the interests and sexual desires of men. My findings demonstrate how customers stereotype camgirls as sexual objects



and take advantage of their subordinate status, based on their paying ability.

Inappropriate comments from customers addressing cam models' physical imperfections furthered their objectification of the camgirls, causing some of them a great deal of emotional stress.

### *Body shaming.*

A few cam models in my study described how some customers insulted them, criticizing certain aspects of their bodies. Customers' judgment of them, communicated via inappropriate comments, particularly impacted cam models who felt less confident about their appearance and about their physical features. For example, Olivia mentioned several times throughout her interview how customers made fun of her breasts during her video performances. Comments such as "Weirdest tits I've ever seen" made her feel insecure about the way she looked. As she put it, "That one thing [comment] about my boobs really hurt." She further explained that breastfeeding had changed the shape of her breasts: "I've had a kid, and it's obvious." She struggled to comprehend why she was the subject of inappropriate jokes because of her body's natural transformation. She explained that at other times, customers would call her a "retard," referring to her disability or "mommy," in reference to her age. Such body-shaming comments negatively impacted Olivia to the point where she had to shut down her entire video sessions on several occasions and take a break from camming for several hours to recover from the hurtful messages. She became "so tired of that shit," that she had to exercise a "ban-happy" approach and block rude customers to protect herself from their negative comments.

Similar to Olivia's experience, Caroline, another cam model from the U.S., described how she struggled with customers' critiques of her body:

Earlier on, when I started camming, negative comments would affect me a lot more than they do now. Especially on Chaturbate, I would allow everybody to talk, whether they have tokens to spend or not, because I enjoy the interaction with everybody. But it would invite trolls and people who are rude and mean, and people who would say: "Oh, you look like you've gained some weight recently." ... If I was having one of those days when I was feeling a little bit fatter, you know, everybody has those days—the days that you don't feel as beautiful, and then that one person says that comment. There could be a hundred good comments and one rude person, and if that rains through to you, it stinks. There were days when it would hit me hard, and I would need to get off camera ... leave, to deal with that.

When I asked her to describe how she dealt with this negative impact, she said that she had to see a therapist for a while "when I was battling depression and things like that." Her partner also provided much needed support and helped Caroline to improve her self-esteem by "chewing down" customers' negative comments. As she explained, in order to boost her self-confidence and "build up that armor that you put on to get on cam," she had to implement some healthy habits such as "eating well and going to the gym." Working on building up her inner confidence helped Caroline to develop "the certain mindset;" she learned how to ignore body shaming from customers, so it wouldn't affect her as much as it had earlier in her career.

Claire and Piper also talked about customers' criticisms of flaws in their appearance. For instance, Claire described how she did not appreciate a "weird member" who commented that she "needed to fix [her] teeth." Piper's customer pointed out that she had a few moles on her face, as if she wasn't aware of that. Piper also described how customers "attacked" her make up or certain outfits: "Sometimes I wear white underwear, they'll think of wearing a diaper, and they'll call me a baby."

When cam models were describing these experiences, I thought how absurd some customers were in their nitpicking. They treated cam models like Barbie dolls, dehumanizing and commodifying them by limiting their unique personalities to certain body parts. In the online world of camming, customers can hide their personas behind their nicknames (and even their appearances if they choose not to be visible to the cam model); they can insult camgirls without facing any of the consequences they would face in offline settings. Body shaming from customers gave some cam models like Olivia and Caroline negative self-images, affecting their performance and confidence.

### *Stigma.*

Coping with the stigma related to sex work was another important obstacle for all of the camgirls in my study. Goffman (1963) defines stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting.” Individuals who belong to stigmatized groups, such as sex workers, are more likely to be perceived by communities as deviant (Rael 2015). Recognizing the prejudice that surrounds the industry they work in, sex workers often fear discrimination by and rejection from individuals and the institutions they belong to. Similar to findings by Guidroz and Rich (2010) about impression management among phone sex operators, cam models in my study talked about their selective revealing strategies when sharing information about their online job with others. To maintain a positive self-image, both Caroline and Emily were selective in who they revealed the details of their professional occupation to, depending on the setting and people they were talking to. As Caroline explained:

So, there've been plenty of events where like a half of people in the room know what I really do, but the other half doesn't need to know. (*Laugh*). I've gone to a bridal shower where my family and my cousins know, but their friends and neighbors don't need to know what I do. So, it's interesting, having to navigate

that room. Like: “Okay, so, who am I today? What persona am I putting on?” Being careful about what things to say and not say. That’s something that we have struggled with.

Emily, who stood out from the rest of the women in my study as being the most confident about her camming identity, experienced the same challenges of having to selectively disclose information regarding her work to others:

It depends on how well I know the person and through what avenue I know them ... I have to gauge what I think their response is gonna’ be. If I think they are trying to be accepting, then I’ll tell them the truth. If I see that somebody is gonna’ judge me, then I am not gonna’ tell them because I just don’t need to feel that judgement from somebody that isn’t really relevant in my life.

Some camgirls felt more confident than others about revealing information regarding their online job to their families. For example, Irina, a former retail employee from Russia, did not have to hide her occupation from her supportive parents; however, she chose to omit some of the details about the cam modeling industry:

They knew that my job was to chat with foreign people, keep them interested, and I will get money for that, and that’s it, pretty much [sic]. My parents, they always told me: “Unless it’s not harmful to you, not harmful to other people, it’s fine.” “You don’t do any forbidden stuff that can be bad for your health, yeah.” But they didn’t know all the details, exactly what I was doing there.

It took Caroline a long time to build up the courage “to own” her profession as a cam model. Overcoming the fear of being judged by family members came to her with time and experience. She mentioned that it took her almost a year to prepare her mother for an open conversation about her job:

... I told my mom that I was still working at the same company I was at, for about six months. And then after a couple times of her trying to meet me at lunch for something, I kept driving from home closer to work to meet her for lunch. It was so ridiculous to me; I was lying to her. So, after that I switched to like: “Okay, I am still working with that company, but I am working from home.” So, I took that step of like: “Okay, so I am working from home now....” There are a lot of stages for my mom to get used to it. So, there was that initial conversation where she asked a lot of those questions. First a few months she was really concerned.

Whenever she came up with a new thing that she was worried about, she'd ask me about it.

Despite being open with her mother, Caroline mentioned that her mother struggled to accept her daughter's choice: "I can tell that she couldn't really brag about me anymore, like [that was] something that I took away from her." Even though Caroline felt relieved, she also felt some negative emotional residue because of her mother's disappointment of her career path. After almost a year of working as a cam model, Caroline had reached the level of confidence where she was able to say to people: "This [camming] is my job." At a high school reunion, Caroline very quickly got attention after she spiced up "a boring conversation" of her former classmates about their career paths with: "Oh yeah, I am making porn on cam[era]."

The experiences of Svetlana and Ashley were quite different from Irina's and Caroline's. Whereas Irina and Caroline had "to adjust" the information about their camming careers so their families would be able to comprehend it, Svetlana and Ashley struggled to open up to their families about their web cam jobs. For example, Svetlana said she felt extremely embarrassed about being a cam model; revealing this information to her family at any point would be a very traumatizing experience for her:

It was embarrassing for myself to work there; how embarrassing it would be to tell my family, my parents. No, that's an awful thing to do. I am afraid of the shame, I would be considered as a hooker for sure, even if I didn't sleep with people. I am ashamed of that job. But that's my experience, I can't change my past.

She said that she wouldn't talk about that, even though she had met her husband by being a web model.

Ashley's experience was not as emotionally traumatizing as Svetlana's, but she also expressed being afraid to open up to her husband about her secret source of

income. Whenever her spouse would come back home from his work, Ashley had to hide “a notebook where [she] kept the hours” she had put in that day. When I asked Ashley if she would be able to tell her family about her entrepreneurship at some point, she responded, laughingly: “My in-laws would probably try to kill me if they will find out [sic].” Being aware of the conservative views of people in her personal network, Ashley decided that being honest about her job would not benefit anyone:

Normally, you hear about when camgirls come out as doing this kind of thing. They maybe dishonored from their families; their friends stop talking to them. I am scared of that. So, I haven’t really told anybody.

Another strategy employed by several camgirls to protect themselves from social judgment was “covering up” their occupation with more socially accepted professions. For instance, when having conversations with women from the aerobics class at the gym, Emily would tell them about her life coaching business. As she put it: “I don’t know them; I don’t know what their beliefs and judgments are going to be.” Caroline noted that her mother omits her camming business in conversations with acquaintances, instead mentioning that her daughter owns a production company, to avoid “shocked faces.”

Three women in my study emphasized that their cam modeling business was a “real job” where they did not have to sleep with customers, unlike prostitution. Piper, who lived in “a very gossipy town,” struggled to establish good relationships with “locals” from her community who found out that she was a cam model. When Piper opened up about her occupation to a seller “from her favorite weed store,” the store owner “accused [Piper] of doing meth and tossed [her] out.” To handle negative associations with her online job, Piper embraced its “real job” status: “I am a model. I am a sexy

model. I am honest about my job because it's a job." Laughingly, Piper concluded that "this city has a few issues with me" because "they are just jealous 'cause I make money at home."

Similar to Piper, Ashley tried to distance cam modeling from the stigmatized sex industry by presenting it as a more socially acceptable "normal job:" "It was like customer service but with little less clothes." Irina described her camming job as similar to one of TV actresses, also "normalizing" its deviant aspect:

... because it's nothing bad. You start to understand that models in a model business, or actresses, they do it all the time; they do some erotic or some revealing [things], like body scenes in front of many people, strange people, men and women, other people they don't know ... It's just part of their job, and they are still doing it.

All of the camgirls in my study experienced some form of prejudice at some point while working as cam models. To overcome stigma related to sex work, in particular to the camming industry, they employed several techniques. Some camgirls selectively revealed details regarding their occupation in conversations with family members and people in their personal networks. Others distanced themselves from sex work by "normalizing" the camming industry and omitting its deviant aspects. Some women gave their camming business more traditional and socially acceptable titles as a way to overcome stigma related to the cam modeling industry.

My analysis revealed that all cam models in my data set have encountered traumatic experiences or instances of ill-treatment while working in the industry that affected their emotional and psychological well-being. These include dealing with stalkers and customers' degrading requests as well as coping with body shaming from customers, and negative stigma towards sex workers.

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of online cam modeling is a product of its time: it emerged in the era when interpersonal relationships shifted from real life to the virtual world. Nowadays people meet, interact, date, and live online. Despite its relative newness, cam modeling is a rapidly growing business that has begun to transform the industry of adult entertainment. Its interactive nature and ability to provide a “customized” sexual experience attracts visitors to video sessions with cam models, resulting in the decline of traditional pornography (Senft 2008). While webcam broadcasts have a number of similarities with the traditional porn industry—a virtual platform, a sexual context, and a variety of categories—the interactive nature of communication between camgirls and customers sets it apart from traditional pornographic videos. Camming provide a unique opportunity to fulfill sexual desires and create intimacy for those customers for whom it might not be accessible in real life. The opportunity to earn a substantial income attracts thousands of people into cam modeling business to meet this growing demand.

This research explored the experiences of women in the cam modeling industry and the aspects of the industry that make it an empowering and (or) exploitative form of women’s labor. This approach was grounded in the existing discourse on the commercial sex industry and its impact on female workers, particularly in debates of liberal and radical feminist scholars. My research revealed several findings regarding camgirls’ experiences that support claims from opposing feminists’ ideologies.

Consistent with the liberal feminist theory (Califia 1980; Wills 1981; Rubin 1984), my study found that women make a conscious choice to engage in cam modeling, seeking financial independence as well as sexual empowerment. Camgirls discussed



how working in this industry provided them with opportunities to become independent entrepreneurs who are financially self-sufficient. Some camgirls reported making significantly higher earnings from online performances compared to their previous offline occupations. Along with financial benefits, cam models were attracted to a flexible work schedule and the opportunity to work from their own homes. For some cam models, like Caroline, Olivia, and Emily, camming websites became a starting platform in creating their online adult entertainment business that eventually became their full-time job. These findings support the argument of pro-sex scholars who claim that the sex industry is a form of employment and its workers have to be treated as individuals in any other professional occupation. Additionally, experiences of camgirls in my study are illustrative of arguments made by liberal feminists about sexual fulfillment and empowerment that women discover through their engagement with sex work. An opportunity to interact with customers in video sessions allowed some cam models to discover and express their own sexualities via fulfillment of customers' unique requests and sexual fantasies. Attention and admiration from customers enhanced some camgirls' self-confidence and self-esteem. Performing adult shows online helped several camgirls in my study, such as Caroline and Olivia, to improve their sex lives with their life partners by adding variety or helping them learn to overcome barriers to sexual intimacy.

Moreover, in terms of positives, my research found that involvement in the camming industry expanded camgirls' social networks via establishing long-term friendships with their customers and camgirl peers. Several interviewees in my data set reported that some of their devoted customers eventually became their legitimate

friends in the offline world. For Svetlana and Irina, cam modeling became an opportunity not to only create friendships with their customers but also to find their significant others. Similar to findings from previous studies, such as the sociability of actresses in the porn industry (Abbot 2002), women in my study developed strong social ties with other camgirls whom they met on camming forums or at promotional events, surrounding themselves with a supportive and non-judgmental community of women who shared similar experiences. Bonding with other sex workers became a form of overcoming the stigma associated with the online adult entertainment industry.

My findings demonstrate that women begin cam modeling after considering a number of work alternatives. Those women are not necessary forced into it by life circumstances, which counters a widespread argument of radical feminists who do not acknowledge that women make a conscious choice to engage in sex work. Several camgirls in my data set, like Piper and Irina, mentioned that they had difficulties finding a job prior to entering cam modeling. However, their decision to engage in adult online entertainment was not their last resort to get employment. For them, the benefits of cam modeling outweighed the benefits of their other job opportunities.

Consistent with the liberal feminist theory, the experiences of camgirls in my study clearly demonstrate that cam modeling can be empowering for many women, allowing them to make life-determining decisions. Camgirls attain empowerment by making a bold decision to get involved with the industry despite public prejudice. While people across the world still view sex work as immoral, a lot of women profit from cam modeling while enjoying this work that allows to some of them to creatively express their sexuality. Nowadays, when so many women are still financially dependent on others,

camming becomes a path to self-sufficiency: women take an active role in their own lives without relying on outside support. Moreover, camming platforms allow women to explore their sexual aspirations that they cannot fulfill in existing social norms of heterosexual, monogamous relationships.

Despite the majority of camgirls discussing the benefits of working in the industry, all of them also mentioned various hazards and pitfalls of the business that align with radical feminists' arguments about the harmful nature of sex work (Dworkin 1985; MacKinnon 1988; Snyder 2008). Camgirls' interviews revealed that they face various challenges of working in the industry that affect their emotional and psychological well-being. These include dealing with stalkers and customers' degrading requests, coping with body shaming from customers, and negative stigma towards sex workers. Despite the relatively secure working environment of cam modeling, the virtual nature of this work does not protect camgirls from psychological violence in the form of blackmail and threats made by customers. Camgirls have to constantly be on guard against customers who can tarnish their reputation by disclosing their occupation to friends and family at any time, which can cause psychological and emotional strain.

My findings also support assertions by radical feminists who argue that by purchasing commercial sex men take advantage of the subordinate status of women, denying their agency. One of the main struggles of camgirls in my study was coping with customers' degrading and humiliating requests. The tension between male dominance and female subordination lies in a customers' financial ability to coerce cam models, especially those in a tight financial situation, to perform acts that are beyond their comfort zones. Some customers who visit camming websites to fulfill their

particular fetishes perceive cam models as physical objects for achieving sexual satisfaction, reducing women's personalities to their body parts. Several cam models in my study discussed how customers' inappropriate comments about their bodies' imperfections negatively impacted their sense of self-worth and affected their day-to-day lives: Svetlana suffered from an eating disorder for years; Caroline had to seek help from a mental health professional to recover from adverse psychological outcomes of cam modeling; Olivia and Piper developed their own strategies to cope with work-related stress such as blocking rough visitors or taking time off from camming performances. These findings directly illustrate how female workers can be exploited in the cam modeling industry. These emotional, psychological and/or physical consequences to their well-being is consistent with radical feminist scholars who emphasize the degrading and harmful nature of sex work.

All in all, my findings demonstrated that the experiences of women in cam modeling range from rewarding and empowering to exploitative and harmful. It seems that neither the liberal nor radical feminist frameworks fully capture the range of experiences of camgirls. Cam modeling is neither solely an empowering nor an exploitative form of women's labor. Rather, it combines elements from both perspectives and represents the uneven distribution of agency, subordination, and job satisfaction of workers in the sex industry. This pattern may be better encompassed by the polymorphous paradigm that recently emerged from a feminist discourse on sex work (Weitzer 2009). This newer framework acknowledges the complex structural conditions that shape the sex industry, marrying aspects of both the empowering and oppressive paradigms while avoiding their radical affirmations. The polymorphous

paradigm emphasizes that the experiences of sex workers can differ depending on type of sex work, geographic location, cultural context, and institutional policies and practices. Therefore, the analysis of sex work has to be sensitive to different structural and organizational conditions that shape workers' experiences. In addition, the polymorphous paradigm stresses that both agency and subordination do not necessarily prioritize one another but rather coexist and can be present in the lives of sex workers at any particular moment.

This research makes several contributions to understanding the growing phenomenon of the camgirl industry. My findings demonstrated that research on sex work, which primarily focuses on prostitution, cannot overlook the experiences of thousands of web models worldwide. Sex work cannot be approached as a monolith; instead, it has to be investigated as a multifaceted structure comprised of different industry segments, much as the experiences of women who provide escort services can be radically different from those of street prostitutes or online pornography performers. Moreover, experiences of women in the sex trade are best analyzed from different angles that consider a variety of camgirls' experiences who came from different backgrounds and joined the industry for numerous reasons. My findings also illustrated that rather than characterizing cam modeling as a solely rewarding or oppressive workplace, the majority of camgirls talked about a mix of negative and positive aspects of working in the industry. While facing challenges of coping with the stigma related to sex work and degrading requests from customers, cam models appreciated financial benefits and the opportunity to achieve of sexual liberation that cam modeling provided. Therefore, the phenomenon of web modeling can be also viewed as being on a

continuum from oppressive to rewarding rather than solely an exploitative or empowering form of women's labor.

This study provided camgirls with an opportunity to share their own perspectives and to portray a full picture of their online work, oftentimes different from what is presented in media articles which either glamourize the camming industry or entirely focus on its negative aspects. This study also highlighted the importance of investigating experiences of camgirls from different cultural backgrounds that can be dramatically different. This was illustrated by the Russian interviewees in my study who perceived their camming work as an opportunity to build serious relationships with their customers outside of camming platforms. The rest of camgirls never considered this option, avoiding romantic connections in interacting with customers. My research also demonstrated that the working environment matters: the experiences of camgirls who work from their own homes differed from experiences of cam models who broadcast their performances from studio settings. An insiders' understanding of the industry can help to improve public knowledge and attitudes to reduce stigma and negative stereotypes that surrounds sex workers.

This study had several limitations. Due to time constraints, this study focused only on female web models. Future research should investigate experiences of male and transgender online performers. Generally, in studies that have adopted a victim-oriented approach to sex industry, female workers are seen as victims of male oppression and exploitation while experiences of male sex workers are not taken into consideration and excluded from the analysis. Comparative analysis of online performers across gender will help to understand how experiences of male and

transgender workers are different or similar to ones of their female counterparts what will provide a comprehensive and diverse picture of cam modeling industry. Future researchers should also consider the analysis of cam modeling through a trauma lens to address the possible sexual violence that some camgirls can experience while working in the industry.

The ethnographic observations of this research primarily focused on three camming categories of the website LiveJasmin.com. Future research should examine the full range of camming categories and websites to provide more accurate representation of the cam modeling industry. Future researches should also consider interviewing cam models with different body types/appearances to see if those with certain body types/appearances experience more critical or stressful comments. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, I was able to recruit only eight in-depth interview subjects. A larger and more diverse sample size would provide a fuller picture of the cam modeling industry. Future researchers also should seek a sample that include performers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds from different countries to better understand how social and cultural differences shape camgirls' experiences, which will allow a comparative multicultural analysis. For example, based on my findings, I suggest that a comparative study of experiences of Russian and American cam models can uncover why some Russian women consider web camming websites as an avenue for searching life partners whereas American women typically perceive cam modeling as a platform for making money, avoiding romantic relationships with customers. To better understand the phenomenon of the cam modeling, future research should employ the polymorphous theoretical framework, which is sensitive to the

dynamics that take place in sex work across time, place, and sector and considers complexities and the structural conditions that shape experiences of women in the industry.



## APPENDIX A: OBSERVATION GUIDE

### “Fetish” Cam Model 1

<b>Observation Date/Time:</b>	
1. Nickname	
2. The layout of the room: décor, furniture, lighting, remarkable details	
3. Cam model's appearance: clothing, make up, hair style	
4. Cam model's demeanor: facial expressions, language and voice, body language	
5. Customers and their comments that stand out in a chatroom	
6. General mood of the video session	
7. Number of customers in a chatroom (at the beginning/at the end of the session)	

**Notes:**

## APPENDIX A: OBSERVATION GUIDE

### “Newbie” Cam Model 1

<b>Observation Date/Time:</b>	
1. Nickname	
2. The layout of the room: décor, furniture, lighting, remarkable details	
3. Cam model's appearance: clothing, make up, hair style	
4. Cam model's demeanor: facial expressions, language and voice, body language	
5. Customers and their comments that stand out in a chatroom	
6. General mood of the video session	
7. Number of customers in a chatroom (at the beginning/at the end of the session)	

**Notes:**

## APPENDIX A: OBSERVATION GUIDE

### “Hot Flirt” Cam Model 1

<b>Observation Date/Time:</b>	
1. Nickname	
2. The layout of the room: décor, furniture, lighting, remarkable details	
3. Cam model's appearance: clothing, make up, hair style	
4. Cam model's demeanor: facial expressions, language and voice, body language	
5. Customers and their comments that stand out in a chatroom	
6. General mood of the video session	
7. Number of customers in a chatroom (at the beginning/at the end of the session)	

**Notes:**

## APPENDIX B: SUBJECT INFORMATION AND INFORMED CONSENT

**Study Title:** Exploitation or Empowerment? Women's Experiences in the Cam Modeling Industry

**Investigator:** Ekaterina Bays  
Department of Sociology  
University of Montana  
Missoula, MT 59812  
Phone: (406) 240-5502  
Email: [ekaterina.bays@umconnect.umt.edu](mailto:ekaterina.bays@umconnect.umt.edu)

**Faculty supervisor:** Dr. Teresa Sobieszczyk  
Department of Sociology  
University of Montana  
Missoula, MT 59812  
Phone: (406)243-4868  
Email: [teresa.sobieszczyk@umontana.edu](mailto:teresa.sobieszczyk@umontana.edu)

**Special Instructions:** This consent form may contain words that are new to you. If you read any words that are not clear to you, please ask me to explain them to you.

**Purpose:** You are being asked to take part in a research study investigating the industry of cam models who broadcast online performances on the platform of the website LiveJasmin.com. You have been invited to participate because you saw one of my recruitment posts and got in contact with me, or because you were in the personal network of another study participant and heard about this project through word of mouth. The purpose of this research is to add knowledge to a relatively new area of research. The study also provides an opportunity for cam models to voice their experiences and opinions. The results will be used for my thesis, which is a requirement for completing my master's degree program. You must be 18 to 65 years old to participate in this research.

**Procedures:** If you agree to take part in this research study, you will have a single one-on-one interview with me approximately for 60 to 90 minutes long. The interview will take place in a quiet, public location or via Skype at a mutually convenient date and time.

**Payment for Participation:** As an incentive for participating in this study, you will receive \$30 which will be transferred to you by means of online payment services such as Venmo or PayPal.

**Risks/Discomforts:** There is no anticipated discomfort for those contributing to this study, so risk to participants is minimal. You will be informed of any new findings that may affect your decision to remain in the study.

**Benefits:** Your participation in this study may help to understand experiences of women in the web cam industry, which is an understudied phenomenon.

**Confidentiality:** Your records will be kept confidential and will not be released without your consent except as required by law. Your identity will be kept private. If the results of this study are written in a scientific journal or presented at a scientific meeting, your name will not be used. The data will be stored in a locked file cabinet. Your signed consent form will be stored in a cabinet separate from the data. The audiotape will be transcribed without any information that could identify you, and then the tape will then be erased.

**Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal:** Your decision to take part in this research study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in, or you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are normally entitled. You may leave the study for any reason.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about the research now or after the interview, please contact me, Ekaterina Bays, at (406) 240-5502. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact the UM Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (406) 243-6672.

**Statement of Your Consent:** I have read the above description of this research study. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions I may have will also be answered by a member of the research team. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study. I understand I will receive a copy of this consent form.

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Printed Name of Subject

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Subject's Signature

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Date

**Statement of Consent to be Photographed and Videotaped:** I understand that photographs and video recordings may be taken during the study. I consent to having my photograph taken and being video recorded. I consent to use of my photograph and video in presentations related to this study. I understand that if photographs and video recordings are used for presentations of any kind, names or other identifying information will not be associated with them. I understand that audio recordings will be erased following transcription and that no identifying information will be included in the transcription.

Subject's Signature

Date

**Compensation for Injury:** There are no risks associated with this study. However, in the event that you are injured as a result of this research you should individually seek appropriate medical treatment. If the injury is caused by the negligence of the University of Montana or any of its employees, you may be entitled to reimbursement or compensation pursuant to the Comprehensive State Insurance Plan established by the Department of Administration under the authority of M.C.A., Title 2, Chapter 9. In the event of a claim for such injury, further information may be obtained from the University's Risk Manager (406-243-2700; [jason.sloat@mso.umt.edu](mailto:jason.sloat@mso.umt.edu)) or the Office of Legal Counsel (406-243-4742; [legalcounsel@umontana.edu](mailto:legalcounsel@umontana.edu)). (Reviewed by University Legal Counsel, December 31, 2018)

## APPENDIX C: QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What was your work experience before you became a cam model?
  - a. Before that, did you have another job? If so, what was it like?
2. Please tell me how you became a cam model?
  - a. When was that?
  - b. How did you find out about this industry?
  - c. Can you please tell me what drew you to this industry?
  - d. Anything else?
3. How long have you been working as a cam model?
4. What are the most rewarding aspects about being a cam model?
  - a. Why is that aspect rewarding for you?
  - b. Are there any other aspects you find rewarding? If so, what are they? Why is each rewarding to you?
  - c. Of the rewarding aspects of being a cam model you just mentioned, which aspects are the most important to you? Why?
5. What are some difficulties about being a cam model?
  - a. Why was that aspect difficult for you?
  - b. Are there any other difficulties you have experienced? If so, what are they? Why is each difficult for you?
  - c. Of the difficulties of being a cam model that you just mentioned, which aspects are the most important to you? Why?
6. Which web modeling category (-ies) do you perform in?
  - a. Why did you choose each particular category?

7. Please describe your experiences with customers.
  - a. What was the most positive experience you have had?
  - b. What was the most negative experience you have had?
  - c. Can you please describe a typical private session with a customer?
8. I know from my research that cam models work in different settings. Some of them work from their own place, others work in a studio. Do you currently work in a studio or from home?
  - a. What is working from studio/home like?
9. If you work in a studio:
  - a. What are the benefits of working there?
  - b. Are there other models who work in the same studio with you?
  - c. Please describe your interactions and relationships with other models who work in your studio.
  - d. What are the downsides of working in a studio?
  - e. Anything else?
10. If you work from home:
  - a. What are the benefits of it?
  - b. What are the downsides of working from home?
  - c. Anything else?
11. Do you have another job (s) besides cam modeling?
  - a. If yes, can you explain how you combine the two jobs?
  - b. If not, tell me why you only work as a cam model.



12. Some models have told me that their families know about their occupation as a cam model. Others told me that their families don't know. Can you please share your experience?
  - a. Do your family members know that you work in this industry? What do they think about it?
  - b. If they don't know, do you think you'll tell them? Why/why not?
13. Is there anything else that you'd like to add that we didn't already cover?
14. Thank you for sharing your experience with me. Your participation is very valuable for my research project.
15. Do you know any other cam models who might be willing to speak with me? If so, could you put me in touch with them?

Researcher notes:

Date and time of interview \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's assessment of the candidness of interview subject \_\_\_\_\_  
(High/medium/low)

Note interruptions of interview, if any \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT POST FOR WECAMGIRLS FORUM

Hello. My name is Kat Bays, I am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Montana and conducting a research project for my Master's thesis.

You are being asked to take part in a study investigating the industry of cam models who broadcast live performances online. The purpose of my study is to add to a relatively new area of research and also to allow cam models to voice their opinions and perceptions on their line of work. I invite you to participate in a confidential one-on-one interview with me about your experiences as a camgirl. You should be 18 years old or over, identify as a woman and currently perform as a cam model. The interview will last about an hour and will take place in a quiet, public location or via Skype at a mutually convenient date and time. As an incentive for participating in this study, you will receive \$30 which will be transferred to you by means of online payment services such as Venmo, Cash App or PayPal.

There is no anticipated discomfort or risks associated with this study. Your participation in this research is voluntarily. You can decline your participation, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time. Your identity and records related to this study will be kept confidential and will not be released without your consent except as required by law. If the results of this study are written in a scientific journal or presented at a scientific meeting, your name will not be used.

If you wish to participate in this research, please contact me at 406-240-5502 or via email [ekaterina.bays@umconnect.umt.edu](mailto:ekaterina.bays@umconnect.umt.edu). If you have any questions or concerns regarding this project, you may contact the University of Montana Institutional Review Board at 406-243- 6672.

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